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MIKE SHAYNE

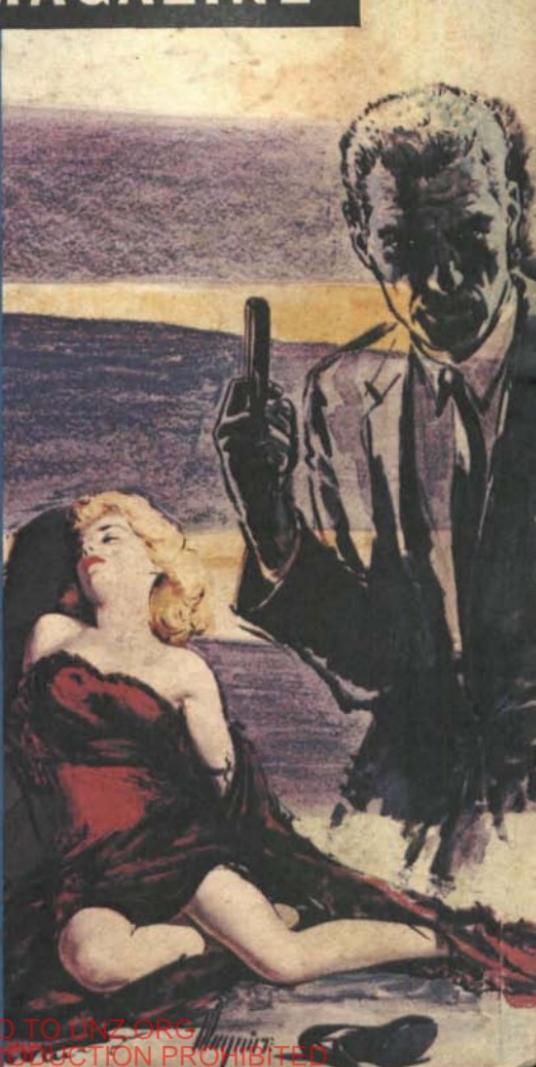
MYSTERY MAGAZINE

ROAD TO NOWHERE

a new short
Mike Shayne novel
by BRETT HALLIDAY

DEATH WEARS A WHITE HAT

a new short novel
of suspense by
M.G. OGAN



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MIKE SHAYNE



MYSTERY MAGAZINE

TWO COMPLETE SHORT NOVELS

THE ROAD TO NOWHERE

by BRETT HALLIDAY

Into the night a big truck was red-ballng to its date with Murder. Could Mike Shayne find the reason for the strange consignment that only Death could sign for? Exactly twelve hours would tell him the answer — or kill him on the spot.

..... 2 to 49

DEATH WEARS WHITE HAT

by M. G. OGAN

They were all there, the hippies and their unwashed, unwanted jills. And — someone else. A hard core of torpedoes, waiting for the final act to start. The grand finale — in which I was to take my final bow, more or less perforated with bullets!

..... 74 to 100

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ROAD TO NOWHERE

by BRETT HALLIDAY

They red-balled through the darkness, and Fear rode by their side, for there was no road back and they knew it. Could Mike Shayne save that hell truck's crew — before it was too late?



MICHAEL SHAYNE held to the hand holds on the side of the truck interior. In the dark, he crouched behind the load of packing cases. With the truck moving fast, bouncing along the highway, he could not have stood up anyway.

Where he was hidden he had a clear view of the rear gate through a small opening among the crates—a carefully arranged opening. He himself couldn't be seen by anyone opening the rear of the truck.

It was the plan; Shayne was tense and alert

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THE NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL



where he crouched in the dark truck interior. Three days now he'd been riding the hard floor of the big truck. Nothing had happened. But he remained alert, tense, ready every second for the sudden stop, the squeal of the brakes, the skid and the silence followed by the hard voice speaking somewhere outside.

Three days of crouching in the dark as the truck drove on along its route, going over the plan in his mind, and the events that led up to it . . .

Mike Shayne had been late into the office that morning. He'd just finished a long case that had taken him to Montreal and Seattle and had gotten back to Miami late. The result was that he overslept, and was in a groggy mood as he strode in the door.

"You look terrible, Michael," Lucy Hamilton said.

"You know how to hurt a man, Angel," Shayne said to his pert secretary.

Her brown eyes twinkled. "All you need is my loving care, Michael."

"That and ten days in Acapulco, Angel. You ever been in Seattle? They invented rain up there, and they don't want to let it go."

"Poor Michael," Lucy said.

"Just let me sleep all morning."

"Can't. There's a long distance call waiting. Call operator twelve."

Shayne groaned and went on into his private office. He hung his

panama on the hatrack, missing once and swearing. He sat and stared at nothing. He was too tired, and should have stayed home today. Instead, he sighed, reached for the telephone receiver, and asked for operator twelve.

"One moment please, Mr. Shayne."

There was a silence, a series of clicks and buzzes, and a voice Shayne knew came on.

"Mike? John Eagen. I've got a job for you."

Shayne sighed. John Eagen was chief of the investigation department of All-North Insurance Company in New York.

"Tell me the bad news, John," Shayne said.

"You don't need work?"

"I need sleep," Shayne said, "but shoot."

"It's a hi-jacking deal. An insuree of ours down in Miami, McBride's Hauling Transport, is being hit—regular and neatly. It's got the smell of an inside contact—too damned efficient. Our man on the job Dirk Maddox, says he needs some special help. I don't know the details; Maddox has been on the scene."

"Do I contact Maddox?"

"No, Maddox has some reason for keeping it all real quiet. Joe McBride isn't going to meet you either. He's the boss and owner."

"So who's going to meet me?"

"The manager, Lars Jensen. He's going to come to your office about

eleven o'clock this morning. He'll tell you all you want to know. I'm just setting the contract."

"Usual terms?"

"Like always, Mike Be careful on this one. Dirk Maddox is one of our best men. If he needs special help, it's no tea party."

"I'll be careful," Shayne said drily.

"Keep in touch," Eagen said as he hung up.

Shayne lit a cigarette and closed his eyes. The sun was hot where he leaned slumped in his chair. Hi-jacking. That usually meant a lot of action and running around. He sighed. He would have sighed louder if he knew where he was going to spend the next three days.

II

THE TRUCK slowed sharply. Mike tensed, eased the safety off his big automatic, and listened.

The highway traffic flowed past in the same steady rumble of sound. Shayne heard no sounds of trouble or alarm. His gray eyes watched the small light above his head that would be the signal of trouble if Maddox and the driver could give the signal.

Nothing happened.

After a few moments the truck picked up speed again, rolled in the same steady pace along the night highway.

Shayne clicked the safety back on his automatic, leaned back in his

dark corner to think about Lars Jensen . . .

At precisely eleven o'clock on the day John Eagen had called to give him the job, Shayne heard the man enter his office. Lucy's buzz came moments later:

"Michael? A Mr. Lars Jensen to see you."

"Send him in, Angel."

He was a big man, Lars Jensen, but no longer young. Tall, bald, with the bones of a wrestler or an old truckdriver in the days before unions, when a man unloaded, loaded, his own truck. The skin was loose and slack on his frame, the flesh of his youth wasted away with advancing age. Not an old man, but not young, and behind a desk in an office too many years now.

"Mr. Shayne?"

Shayne nodded, and indicated a seat. He watched the manager of the trucking company. Jensen was nervous. Part of it was the perpetual unease of a man still not accustomed to dealing in words instead of muscles. But part of it was something else.

"Mr. Eagen called you?" Jensen asked.

"That he did," Shayne said. "Hi-jacking, probably an inside angle, and you'll give me the details."

Jensen chewed on his lip. "I don't like it. Mr. McBride ought to have come himself."

"Eagen says there're reasons," Shayne said.

"I know," Jensen said, his voice

low and gravelly. "That inside angle. They don't want anyone to know you're being hired, and figured if there is an inside angle I won't be watched and seen coming to you. Only I don't like being on the spot."

"At least they trust you," Shayne said. "If someone is watching, they'd sure to be watching Maddox and McBride."

"They trust me hell!" Jensen snapped. "I'm just all they got to send. If anything goes wrong—I'm the one to blame."

The big man slammed his fist on the desk, and his eyes had a wild look as he stared straight into Shayne's eyes. Shayne didn't even blink.

The redhead took out a cigarette, lit it, blew smoke, and said evenly: "Let's have the details, Mr. Jensen. No one's going to blame you for anything, unless you've got reason to get blamed."

Jensen colored. "What the hell does that mean?"

"I don't know. I don't know the story yet."

Jensen blinked. "Okay. It's simple. McBride's Hauling Transport's been hi-jacked three times in the last month. It never happened before. We don't haul much that's worth hi-jacking. Most of our hauls are heavy equipment for industrial outfits."

"That wasn't what was hi-jacked?"

"Not exactly," Jensen said.

"Twice it was electronic equipment, smaller stuff but still industrial. Not the kind of load you'd expect hi-jackers to want, even though it's worth about one hundred grand a load."

"Can it be sold easy?"

"Not easy, but if they had a market set up it could be sold for a good price."

"Has any of it been traced?"

"No."

"The trucks?"

"Both still missing."

Shayne rubbed his gaunt jaw. "That's not the usual M.O. for hi-jackers. They get rid of the truck fast, usually."

Jensen nodded. "Drive it as far as they can in a short time after transferring the load, and just abandon it. I know the way they work. I've been a trucker all my life."

"What about the third load?" Shayne asked.

Jensen looked grim. "The first two we figured could have been coincidence, although the only two smaller-part shipments we'd made in a month seemed kind of funny to get lifted. The third one made us all look at each other."

"Tell me," Shayne said.

"A special load. Television sets. We get maybe three loads a year like that when some bigger hauler is overloaded and calls us to subcontract fast. Mostly we don't get two days notice. We didn't this time. We got exactly thirty-six

hours notice. Yet they were waiting for the truck."

Shayne whistled. "That truck found?"

"Yes. Two hour later, empty. The sets haven't turned up."

Shayne let the silence stretch as he smoked. There was almost no question but that there had to be an inside connection to the hijackers.

"The destination of the three trucks was all different?" Shayne asked.

"All different. The first two loads were regular, no tie-in to the other hauler who gave us the TV load. Only five people could have known the loads were going out, what route, and what the loads contained."

Shayne nodded. "Okay, What do you want me to do?"

"They didn't tell me the details," Jensen snapped. "I'm just to get you, fill you in here, and bring you out to the warehouse as some kind of accountant. When you get there Mr. McBride and Maddox will fill you in on what they've got in mind. No one is to know who you are, or what you're doing, except me and them."

Shayne thought it over. Whoever had set up the arrangement was no fool. If only three people knew who he was, then his job would be secret. If it became clear that his job was known, then only Jensen, or McBride himself, could have revealed it.



"Good," Shayne said, stood up.
"Let's get over there then."

Jensen seemed to hesitate. Shayne watched him. The big manager had something on his mind, that was clear. But Jensen finally stood up without speaking. "Okay, let's go."

Shayne followed the manager out of his office, his gray eyes studying the man, and wondering what Jensen had on his mind.

III

THE TRUCK DROVE on in the night. Mike Shayne, in the back, dozed in his dark corner. Lulled by the ceaseless hum of the wheels on the road, he fought to remain awake. After three days of no action, it was hard to keep the same alertness as at the start.

He fought sleep, and began to wonder if, perhaps, the plan had been discovered, and the hi-jackers

were not going to come. But how had it been discovered, tipped, if it had? How could anyone have known Shayne was riding in the back of the truck loaded with such tempting bait? He had been careful to hide his identity when Jensen brought him to the warehouse of McBride's Hauling Transport three days ago.

Inside the office, where Jensen had introduced him as an accountant, Shayne saw a small, heavy man who looked as though he needed sleep. His suit was rumpled, his jaw blue with beard, but there was the gleam of the hunter in his eyes. He held his hand out to Shayne.

"Dirk Maddox," the heavy man said, smiling. "Heard a lot about you, Shayne. I'm going to enjoy working on this with you. It's a nasty affair."

"They're all nasty," Shayne said, and looked at the other man in the private office. Lars Jensen had left, slowly, as if reluctant to walk in ignorance of what was going to happen in the private office.

"I don't care about all of the affairs," the other man in the office said. "Just my affair."

He was a smooth, elegant man in his late forties. Blond, well-dressed, hair receding on a high forehead. He had an air of command, and also air of detachment, as if he were the boss but usually let hirelings do the work.

Dirk Maddox, the insurance de-

tective, said, "This is Mr. McBride, Shayne. He's the loser."

"No, your company is the loser, but I still don't like my rigs hijacked. It's bad for contracts."

"Not to mention the drivers," Shayne said drily.

"The drivers know the risks. They're well paid," McBride said. "Did Jensen fill you in on the details?"

"Yes," Shayne said.

"Okay," Maddox said. "What's your word?"

"It looks like an inside contact somewhere," Shayne said. "Who knew the loads and the routes?"

Maddox nodded. "Yeah. Well, there was Jensen, McBride here, Salome Varga the assistant manager, the driver of each rig, and that's it."

"Jensen said five people," Shayne said.

"Maybe he meant me," Maddox said. "After the first one, that is. Routine manifest filed the first time with us, too."

"Maybe he meant my wife," McBride said. "I talk at home. She likes to know about the work. She's the daughter of old Marcus Harvey, who used to own this company among others. She still holds pieces of other companies."

"Do you talk anywhere else?" Shayne asked.

Maddox swore. "Let's face it, Shayne, this company isn't that big, and trucking companies are notorious for being run loose and free

and easy. Anyone could have heard about the shipments and the routes, which is why I want you."

"You've got a plan?"

"That's it. The way I see it," Maddox explained, "it's got to be some inside contact. Okay. We'll figure that, but if we try to go about it by finding the inside man we'll be at it for a year. There's just too many loose ends."

"How do we go at it?" Shayne asked.

"From the other end," Maddox said.

McBride swore. "Damn it, Maddox, what other end? If we've got someone inside tipping off hi-jackers, then we better find him fast before I lose more loads, and before your company gets socked for more pay-offs!"

"No, the inside man is going to be too hard to pin down. We could try to trap him, sure, but it's a hundred to one he'd spot the trap and lay low. No, we'll go after the hi-jackers."

McBride scowled. "How? You think they're going to tell us who they are?"

"We make them come to us," Maddox said. "They will, believe me. That's one thing I'm sure of. They've made three good hauls, and they'll come back for more. That's the mistake hi-jackers always make. They get greedy."

Shayne agreed. "When they get away with a haul, they nearly al-



Lucy Hamilton

ways try again unless they're scared off."

"They won't be," Maddox said. "Only the three of us are going to know my plan."

McBride laughed. "Fine. That means that if they don't try again, you're both going to put the finger on me as the inside man."

"No," Maddox said, "unless we find other evidence. Get one thing straight, McBride. Shayne and I work for the insurance company, and owners have been known to hi-jack their own companies before this. But I'm not accusing you, or I wouldn't clue you in on the plan."

"Nice of you," McBride said.

Shayne said, "What's the plan?"

"We'll set up a tempting load, one no hi-jacker could resist," Maddox said. "We'll follow usual routine, short notice, all that. When the truck pulls out, Shayne'll be riding it in the back. He'll be hidden, so that not even the driver knows he's there. I'll ride the cab,

with a signal I can use to warn Shayne if I get the chance."

"Won't they shy off if you're riding shotgun?" Shayne asked.

"No, I don't think so. But we'll have to take the risk. It's logical that McBride would take some precautions for a special load after three heists. By now the inside man knows all about me. So it might look funny if I didn't take steps, and it'll look all the more real if I'm aboard in disguise as a relief driver. They'll be forewarned about me, I figure, and take steps. Hi-jackers work so fast and sudden, they won't worry about me in the cab, but trust to surprise, the way they always do."

Shayne rubbed his chin. "It sounds okay, if it works."

"There's some risk to everything. If McBride didn't try to protect himself, I think they'd be mighty uneasy. Give them some trick they can spot, and they won't look for a double trick. Like during the war, booby traps with double fuses."

"All right," Shayne said, "let's get the truck ready."

IV

NOW MIKE SHAYNE rode the truck. He had ridden it for three days, with new tempting loads each time. It wasn't working. Dirk Maddox was up in the cab, with the third driver they had used just to be on the safe side, but so far the hi-jackers had not appeared.

Each day they had driven the same route with a duplicate load.

"Why not a different route each day known to a different person each time?" Shayne had asked Maddox. "That way we could maybe pinpoint the inside man too."

"No go," Maddox had explained. "It'd be swell, but too out of the ordinary routine. The inside man would spot it, if there is an inside man, and I'm not as sure about that as you are. Hi-jackers are getting smarter. They have new ways of finding out what information they need."

Now it looked like the hi-jackers were too smart all around. Or the inside man had tipped them. Shayne began to think about McBride. He was the only one who knew the plan, beside Shayne and Maddox. But McBride knew that. Would he point the finger at himself by tipping the hi-jackers?

Maybe he'd have to, or risk the capture of the hi-jackers.

And if McBride had tipped them, they would have to just leave the truck alone. If they attacked, and revealed they knew Shayne was in the back, then it would be a sure tip-off that McBride was the guilty man. By just not attacking, no one could be sure why they hadn't attacked.

And Maddox was right. McBride Hauling Transport was a typical small trucking company where secrets didn't stay secrets for long. There were a hundred unknown

ways the plan could have leaked or just plain spotted by accident.

No, there was no way to be sure.

The sudden force flung Shayne against the front wall of the truck, banged his shoulder — hard.

He lurched back and hung on.

The high scream of brakes, the slam of air-brakes locking.

The truck had stopped.

Shayne recovered, slipped off the safety on his automatic, listened, holding his breath.

The silence seemed to stretch for an endless time. A matter of seconds as Shayne, breathless, gripped his automatic, strained to listen, and fixed his eyes on the rear doors at the same instant.

Faint, somewhere ahead, he heard: "Just hold it right there."

Silence and vague mumbling.

"Okay, Mac, slide over. Keep your eyes on the road."

Shayne braced. They were going to drive the truck away first, open the rear later — standard procedure. He would be alone when they came for the load.

"What the hell you trying?" The voice was high, sharp.

The truck didn't move.

Shots!

Three shots.

Muffled cries.

Silence.

Shayne listened, strained. He heard nothing more. He waited. He had the violent urge to get up, get out, run to the cab to see what had

happened. But he forced himself to squat rigid and wait.

If anything had gone wrong in the cab, he could not help now, and his job was to get the hi-jackers when they opened the rear doors.

He waited.

The signal light suddenly blinked once, twice . . .

Shayne heard no sounds at all outside the truck. Only the passing of cars on the highway that seemed to be some yards to the left now.

The signal light blinked again.

There was no doubt in Shayne's mind now. The hi-jackers were gone and the men in the cab were calling for help.

He jumped up, crawled through the boxes, and unlocked the rear doors from inside. He jumped out warily, automatic ready, into the dark night. Nothing happened.

The truck was parked in a dirt road just off the highway.

Shayne saw no one and nothing in the night, only the cars passing on the highway to the left.

Shayne moved cautiously toward the front of the truck.

At first, in the dark, he saw nothing. The truck cab seemed empty. No one and nothing moved. He saw no sign of another car, and realized, suddenly, that while he had heard voices, he had not heard a car.

"Shayne!"

The voice was low, weak and came from somewhere to the left of the truck on the far side of the cab

in the dark, away from Shayne. The redhead moved, crouched, around the front of the truck.

"Here."

Shayne located the voice. He saw a dark shape on the ground, propped up against a tree. It was Dirk Maddox. There was something odd about Maddox, twisted in the night, and then Shayne saw what it was. The man was seated with his back against the tree, his right arm across his body, his right hand holding hard to his left shoulder, his left arm hanging down loose.

"In the cab," Maddox said. "I'm okay."

Shayne nodded, and went to the cab. The driver lay in a pool of blood. There was nothing for Shayne to do. The driver had been shot twice in the head. A young man, not a lot more than a boy, and he was very dead. Shayne went back to Maddox.

"Dead?" Maddox said, his voice still low and edged with pain.

"Dead," Shayne said. "You?"

"A scratch. I got my gun out and they ran. I missed them. I don't know, Mike. They must have smelled something."

Shayne examined Maddo's shoulder. It was a solid wound, but clean, and had missed the bone. The bleeding was slow. Shayne tore up his shirt and tied a tight pressure bandage.

"Thanks," Maddox said. "Got a cigarette?"

Shayne gave him a cigarette. The insurance detective smoked deeply, his hands now beginning to shake.

"What happened?" Shayne asked.

"Very neat. They were pros," Maddox said. "We spotted this big car coming up fast behind us. Evans, that was the driver's name — Pete Evans, just a kid!"

"Easy," Shayne said.

Maddox shook, smoked. "Evans spotted the car, and we had our eyes on it when we came around a curve and this truck was on the highway. Evans had to hit his brakes hard, steer off into this side road. I had my gun out and was watching the big car come up behind. See? Evans was busy with the truck, and watching the other truck blocking the road. I was watching the car behind. So —"

"They had men on foot waiting in this road?"

"That's it. Really neat. They had to know I was aboard, and why, so they kept us busy and caught us cold. Smooth and fast. We never had a chance. I had to drop my gun. They gave us the usual orders."

"They shot. Why?"

Maddox shook his head. "I'm not sure. Maybe I made what looked like a move for my gun on the floorboard, or maybe it was my try for the signal button to you. All I know is they started shooting. Maybe it was something Evans did. I'm damned if I made a bad move openly. But all at once they opened

up. Evans was between me and them. He was hit. I grabbed my pistol from the floor, and blazed back. I guess they figured the shooting would bring help, and maybe they didn't like having killed Evans, so they beat it fast. I hit your signal button, and tried to go after them, but they were already up on the highway."

"The big car and the truck never left the highway?" Shayne asked.

"Never. Smart, that — no tire tracks."

Shayne nodded. "Smart all around, yet they killed Evans. That's not so smart. And they didn't use automatic weapons that spray, either. It sounded like pistols."

"I saw two automatics," Maddox said. "Not so accurate."

"Yeah," Shayne said. "Sit tight, I'm calling in on the radio for help and the police."

He made his call-in, and then began to walk over the ground, studying it for any clues. But there were none. He searched until the State Police sirens growled to a halt up on the highway, but he found absolutely nothing on the ground.

Shayne blinked at the empty ground around the truck, his gray eyes thoughtful.

V

THE STATE POLICE took away Pete Evans's body, and got Mike Shayne's and Maddox's statements.



They released the truck after an examination, and McBride Hauling Transport sent a new driver to bring it in.

McBride himself had come for Shayne and Maddox. The truck company owner stood aside as the State Police lieutenant finished talking to the two detectives, a lieutenant Cole the redhead didn't know.

"No trace of the car or truck," Cole explained. "A clean getaway. Maddox saw two men. Figure at least one driving the car, and one in the truck. That makes four. Can't find any trace of them, but the

ground here's pretty hard this time of year."

"Any chance, Lieutenant?" Maddox asked.

"Not much until we catch them for something else. Coroner says Evans was shot twice with a .45, probably an automatic. Maddox's wound isn't the same. A small gun, .32 probably. We can't find the bullet."

"It was the other guy shot me," Maddox agreed, touching his heavily bandaged shoulder. "What do we do now?"

"Not much," Cole said. "We'll put out the word, have our stoolies listen. Sometimes after a thing like this the crooks get nervous, start fighting. Hi-jackers don't like murder. Besides that, all we can do is look for the loot from the earlier heists."

"We'll have the Miami police do the same things," Maddox said. "I've got a good hunch it all centers there."

"Okay," Cole said. "Keep in touch, and we'll report anything we come up with."

McBride drove them back to town after that, back to the main office of McBride Hauling Transport. Maddox and Shayne sat alone in the office while McBride went to inform the dead driver's family of his death.

"Damned if I want to," the company owner said, "but I guess I better."

"Who's his family?" Shayne asked.

"Just a father, according to the records," McBride said. "When I get back, you two can tell me where we go from here."

It was a good question, and the two detectives sat in silence for some time. Outside in the warehouse they heard the sounds of trucks being unloaded, motors being revved up and checked, the noises of any busy warehouse and garage.

Maddox broke the silence first. "What are you thinking, Shayne?"

"I'm thinking about what Lieutenant Cole said — hi-jackers don't usually like murder. Evans was unarmed. What could have made them start shooting?"

"You think there's maybe more that we don't know?"

Shayne tugged at his earlobe. "I'm wondering why they shot in the first place, and I'm wondering why, having shot Evans and you, they left without the truck. No one came to scare them off. Why not grab the loot?"

"You think they maybe knew you were in the back?"

"I don't know. Maybe, but if they knew, couldn't they have handled just one man? There were at least four of them, and they'd already killed. And if they knew why didn't they just stay away and not attack?"

Maddox was deep in thought. "You think it could be that Pete

Evans was the inside man? Or one inside man, at least?"

"I've thought about it. Maybe he warned them somehow, and they knew there was a trap but didn't know just what kind."

"And they panicked, wanted to cover tracks, so killed their inside man before they ran!" Maddox said. "It could be. Maybe they had him marked all along."

"Stopped the truck just to kill Evans, and that's why they ran without finishing you off. But that would mean they knew it was a trap of some kind — not necessarily that I was in back — and that means they were tipped."

"Sure. By Evans himself. He knew I was riding with him, and maybe he knew it was a special trap load, too. That wouldn't have been hard to figure out."

Shayne rubbed at his gaunt jaw. "Only somehow I don't see Evans alone as the inside man. The contact man between some higher up and the hi-jackers, maybe. He didn't really know the schedule in advance, or which truck he'd drive, but someone higher up would have known.

"A smart inside man should have fixed it so the hi-jackers couldn't afford to kill him."

Maddox was grim. "You've got a point. Okay. I guess it's time we have to look for the inside contact. Maybe it was Evans, and maybe someone else was involved. You're the least known of the two of us, so

you better go after the top people. I'll check into Pete Evans and the other drivers, and see what I can find through some of the fences I know."

"Okay. I'll start on the five who knew about all the routes of the other shipments."

It was agreed to, and Maddox left to get to work. Shayne sat alone in the office and lighted a cigarette. Something was bothering him, something small he had seen, or not seen. He couldn't place it, and stopped thinking about it. If it was important it would come back to him.

The more he thought about the whole pattern of the hi-jackers, the stranger they seemed to have acted. Two trucks not ever found. Now a killing without even taking the load. It had the ring of someone masterminding the whole operation according to some not-normal plan for hi-jackers.

An insurance grab?

That was possible. Maybe someone had hired the hi-jackers, paid them with the load of TV sets that actually did vanish, and had the electronic parts and the trucks hidden somewhere to be disposed of carefully later — and meanwhile the insurance was collected.

He was going to have to look into McBride's actions and the actions of the rest of the top brass of the company.

But first he needed some sleep, more than anything in the world.

VI

MIKE SHAYNE awakened with the sensation that he was being watched. He lay with his eyes closed and listened. His bedroom was as still as a grave. Only the sounds of a sunny Miami morning reached to him from outside his hotel-apartment.

Yet the sensation persisted.

The detective opened his eyes and looked around slowly. He saw nothing. He blinked and reached for a cigarette. He lit the cigarette, and blew smoke—and then he heard it!

A faint sound, like something blowing very softly—something crackling, resonating very softly. He realized that the sensation of being watched had come from his ears! Half asleep, he had heard the same low, resonant hum that seemed to rise and fall like the sound of surf but at a very low level.

There was no mistaking the sound, faint as it was, and it explained Shayne's sense of being watched—his subconscious had sensed the watching. Only it wasn't watching, it was listening. The sound was resonance in a microphone somewhere!

The redhead got out of bed and started his breakfast ritual, careful to make enough noise. He whistled to himself as he prepared his drip-o-lator of coffee. He cooked his bacon and eggs, and ate slowly. Finished,

he poured the coffee, clinking the cup a few times as he sipped.

Then he set the cup down on his napkin, silently, and stood up. Like a cat he stepped softly through the apartment, his ear cocked to hear and locate the sound. At first he couldn't hear it again. He stood absolutely still and strained to hear. He was about to give up and start searching the whole apartment when he heard the faint sound again.

It came from the inner wall of the living room. Shayne's gray eyes searched the wall. The sound had stopped again. It was some sort of faint interference setting up an electronic resonance, and came and went. Shayne moved the two pictures on his wall.

Nothing.

He looked behind the long side table set against the wall, and looked under it. Nothing.

His gray eyes searched the wall again and fixed on a small heat grating high up on the wall. He got a chair, stood on it, looked inside.

For a moment he saw nothing inside the shadowy recess. Then he spotted it, a small microphone no bigger than a cigarette pack. A mike with its own power source and transmitter. A decent range. The listener wouldn't have to be too close.

Shayne stepped down and went to his windows one at a time. Cars were parked all along the street, none he recognized, and the listener could be in any car. He could be somewhere in the building; or just

walking, loitering if he had a small enough receiver.

Shayne considered. It would be all but impossible to find his man. The man would be alert, had probably already begun to wonder about Shayne's silence. Still, if the listener was somewhere inside the building, and that would be the best place in broad daylight with a busy commercial street outside, there was a faint chance.

Shayne went silently to the door, opened it carefully, and pressed his own buzzer. Then he closed the door softly, waited, and reopened it.

"Okay, come in. You have something?" he said aloud.

He covered his face with his hand, changed his voice, answered, "Maybe."

He made it a growl, a gruff voice. He slammed the door, and walked heavily into the center of the room.

"I'll get some coffee," Shayne said in his own voice. "Make yourself comfortable."

He grunted through his hand, and walked openly into the kitchen. He slipped back silently, and turned on his record player with a loud record by the Tijuana Brass: a long-playing record which he knew song by song. Then he slipped out of the room.

He stepped lightly along the corridor, stopping to listen at each door. He heard nothing behind any door.

He rode up in the elevator to the



top, and began to listen at every door, working his way down toward his own floor again. He moved as fast as he could, one eye

on his watch. The record would play for exactly twenty-two minutes.

He reached his own floor again at the sixteen minute mark. Inside he was swearing. It was dragging on too long. If the listener was in the building, the long silence with only the record playing in Shayne's room would make him suspicious. Shayne's only hope was that his faked conversation, that implied his imaginary visitor had something to tell, would keep the listener hoping for the music to stop.

Two floors below his own he had two minutes to go when he stopped dead in the center of the floor corridor.

The music of the Tijauna Brass came faint but clear from directly ahead. The redhead drew his automatic, slipped silently toward the faint music. He found the room. He listened and heard only the music — his music. He was certain, it was the last number on the record. He took a breath and kicked once hard just below the lock of the door.

He almost fell forward on his face.

The door had not been locked!

He recovered, and jumped inside with his automatic ready.

The room was empty.

A small portable receiver sat on a table and played the music of Shayne's record. Even as the redhead watched, the music stopped, and he listened as his distant player made a ghostly clicking

sound, a creaking, and the record began to play again from the start. It was eerie, listening to the operation of his own record player here in the silent and empty room.

The listener had not eluded him by much. But he was gone.

The unlocked door, the abandoned receiver, all told that the listener had only left in a hurry moments before. The chair in front of the receiver was still warm.

Shayne made a search of the room, but he didn't expect to find anything, and he didn't. The listener, whoever he was, wasn't an amateur, and wouldn't have brought anything to this room to give him away.

Shayne left the room as it was, and went back to his own apartment. He picked up the telephone and got Pete on the desk. He described what he'd found.

"Who's got that room, Pete?"

"Hold it a minute, Mr. Shayne," Pete said. "Yeah, here it is. Mr. Salvatore Jones. That's a phony, I guess."

"I guess," Shayne said drily. "Who checked him in?"

"No luck, Mr. Shayne. Phone reservation. Some woman signed in as his wife. I didn't sign her. You want me to ask about it?"

Shayne said, "Never mind. She'll have been a phony, too, and no one I'd recognize. Keep an eye on the room, will you, Pete?"

"You think he'll come back?"

"No, but we might as well watch."

Shayne hung up. The listener would not come back. He'd realized he'd been discovered, had probably been watching from the stairway when Shayne had broken in. Shayne wasn't going to catch the listener that way.

But he knew one thing — someone was worried, and it wasn't a gang of hi-jackers. They had no reason to worry about him, unless there was a loose end. And it was the loose end who was worried most — someone who knew Shayne was on the case.

Before he left, he removed the microphone, just in case.

VII

MCBRIDE'S HOUSE was big and gaudy, with towers like a miniature Taj Mahal. Mike Shayne parked in the circular driveway and felt like an East India Company clerk coming to pay his respects to the Nizam. There were four cars in the garage, all big except one which was small and probably the most expensive — a racing car looking for a track to race on.

A man in the suit of a butler, but with the face of an old fighter who hadn't remembered to duck much, let Shayne in.

"Cool it there, pal," the butler said in the voice of the battered pug.

Some minutes later McBride



himself appeared, wrapped in a silk bathrobe that would have scared a bull with its colors, and nodded Shayne through the house out to a sunny patio a shade smaller than the Orange Bowl. There was a vast pool occupied by one curvy female body that was mostly tanned skin covered by two postage stamps.

"You got anything?" McBride asked him.

"A little," Shayne said. "Some-

one's worried. Evans's death hasn't closed the books. "What do you know about Pete Evans?"

"What the hell should I know?" McBride said. "He was one of my drivers, period. I don't play big daddy to my drivers. Lars Jensen deals with them, not me. All I know about Evans is he wasn't an old hand, been around only a couple of years. Only family was his father."

"He lived with his father?"

"No. The old man's a lush. I found out yesterday. You know what Evans's loving dad said when I broke the sad news? He said, 'He got any insurance?' A real peach. The kid lived alone, except usually not alone if you get me, from what his old man said."

"Any trouble with Evans before?"

"Ask Jensen. I don't know."

"Okay," Shayne agreed. "Now I want you to think long and good. Did you talk to anyone except your wife about the loads that were lifted, about the last load, about the trap, or me, or Maddox?"

"Hell no," McBride said.

Before Shayne could speak again his eyes caught a flash of golden-tanned flesh. A magnificent expanse of tanned flesh, smooth and curved and soft in all the important places. She was grinning, but her eyes weren't smiling. Her browned belly thrust full and inviting above the wisp of cloth she considered a proper bathing suit. A G-string

would have covered more. Her voice matched her eyes—a snarl made of pure ice.

"My husband is a clam, Mr. Shayne," the woman said. "An absolute clam, not to mention an oyster choking on his pearl. Ask him about the pearl. Maybe he talked to his little pearl."

"Shut up, Cynthia!" McBride snapped.

"Go to hell, Fred," Cynthia McBride snapped back. "Mr. Shayne wants to know what's going on, and I'm telling him. Whatever you knew, she knew. And what she knows she uses. Right?"

McBride looked at Shayne, his face suffused with rage but under control. "My wife and I have troubles, Shayne. She'll take any opportunity to attack me. She's talking about her fantasy that I'm involved with my assistant manager, Miss Salome Varga. Even if it was true, Salome wouldn't have to find anything out from me."

Cynthia McBride laughed. "Oh it's true, all right. Dear Fred here pants for our voluptuous Salome. I'm not sure she pants for him, not without all the money which he might not have if he doesn't watch his step."

"I'm warning you, Cynthia!" McBride cried.

Her beautiful face was cold. "Really? Of course, I'd forgotten. You have all that nice insurance money now, don't you? But how long will that last, Fred? In your

style of living? And dear Salome wants just a bit more than money, doesn't she? Oh yes, she wants power, that girl. Real power in a man's world!"

McBride looked at Shayne. "All right. My wife is accusing me of being behind this hi-jacking. It's the kind of thing a frustrated bitch does. Well, I'm not, and I defy anyone to prove I am. As for my wife, I wouldn't put it past her to have arranged it all to break my company. She can be nasty."

Cynthia McBride's voice went low and cold. "You have no idea how nasty, Fred. No idea at all how nasty I can be."

With that shot she turned and stalked off, plunging back into the pool, swimming with a powerful stroke. McBride watched her with unconcealed hatred. Then he turned back to Shayne.

"We're going to split up, that's pretty clear," McBride said, "but it has nothing to do with the hi-jacking. You understand me?"

"Sure," Shayne said. "It has nothing to do with the hi-jacking."

McBride's eyes narrowed. "I don't much like the way you say that, Shayne."

"I don't much care what you like. I'm working for the insurance company, not you. Is what she said about your assistant manager true?"

"Go to hell!" McBride said.

"Not until I know what's behind the hi-jacking," Shayne said. "Where do I find Miss Varga?"

"You don't! You leave her out of this!"

"I leave no one out of this, McBride," Shayne said. "I'll find her."

The redhead turned on his heel and walked through the house. Behind him McBride didn't move. Cynthia McBride still swam the pool with her powerful strokes.

In the house the pug-butler appeared to watch him. The eyes of the old battler were not friendly, but he did nothing except work his hands as Shayne exited.

Outside Shayne climbed back into his car and drove down the circular drive toward town and McBride Hauling Transport. He drove a half a mile and pulled off the road in a side road hidden from the highway by thick trees.

He sat in his car and smoked and looked at his watch. If he was right about McBride he wouldn't have long to wait.

He was right.

Ten minutes later the small racing car roared past with Fred McBride hunched grimly over the wheel.

Shayne gave the trucker a short lead, then pulled out to follow.

VIII

IT WAS EASY tailing. McBride drove fast and steadily with no twists and turns to show that he knew he was being followed. Mike Shayne followed into Miami, and across the nearest causeway, into

Miami Beach. McBride's car screamed to a halt in front of a plush garden apartment complex, and the owner jumped out with a glance right or left and hurried inside.

Shayne parked a half a block away and walked into the office of the apartment complex. A friendly girl smiled at him from behind the desk.

"Yes, sir?"

"I'm looking for a Miss Salome Varga."

"Apartment thirty-two," the girl said promptly, and then eyed him shyly. "Does she expect you?"

"No."

"Well, maybe you better wait then. She's got someone with her now."

"Fred McBride?"

The girl frowned. "You know Mr. McBride?"

"I'm working with him."

The girl relaxed. "He's a regular, you're new. She works with Mr. McBride, too, doesn't she? I believe a girl should work. I mean, it's right we work just like men, and, anyway, you meet men that way."

"Not always the right men," Shayne said.

"You mean like Mr. McBride? He's married, isn't he? I know because I think his wife's been around here watching him. Are you married?"

"No. Does Miss Varga have a lot of visitors?"

"Not too many. She works hard at her job, I guess."

"Ever see a man named Evans? Pete Evans, young," and Shayne described the dead driver.

The girl shook her head. "No, not him."

"Thanks," Shayne said. "I'll come back later."

The girl seemed disappointed, but she only nodded. Shayne went out and back to his car. He sat and smoked. Less than a half an hour later McBride came out and climbed into his racing car. When he had driven away, Shayne went back to the apartment complex and found Apartment 32.

The woman who answered the door was not what he had expected. Beautiful, yes. A good figure, again yes. But he had expected Salome Varga to be imposing, hard-eyed, assured. The woman in the doorway was small and delicate, a madonna face of a pale brown color, and her blue eyes were wide and soft.

"Yes?" she said. Her voice was as soft as the rest of her.

"Miss Varga?"

"Yes," she said, and he got a faint flash of something in her eyes. "You must be Mr. Shayne."

"Right. Can I come in?"

"Of course."

She stepped back and let Shayne pass her into the room. It was a good room, expensive and sunny. It showed taste, comfort, and a lot of money spent on it. Shayne

didn't think an assistant manager of a medium-sized trucking company made that kind of money. She divined his thoughts — and, after all, McBride had just come to warn her about Shayne.

"I have friends, Mr. Shayne," she said as she sat down, crossed a pair of very smooth legs, and lighted a cigarette that wafted perfume into the room. "But you know that, don't you?"

Shayne sat. "I know Mrs. McBride thinks you're playing house with McBride."

"I suppose I am. Cynthia McBride isn't a woman to complain about that. She has her boys to keep her warm, too."

"All good, clean fun, eh?" Shayne said.

"You might say that," Salome Varga said, "and you can also say it's none of your business."

Shayne rubbed at his gaunt jaw. "I could, yeah. The trouble is I'm not sure it isn't my business. Playing house with the boss is one thing, but when the boss's wife implies there's money involved, and maybe power, that's something else. Especially when the boss's wife implies that if she divorces the boss he won't have so much money."

"What else is it in that case, Mr. Shayne?"

"Well, it makes a detective wonder if there isn't maybe more behind some pretty damned odd hi-jacking."

She smoked her perfumed cig-



arette and seemed to think about it. After a moment she nodded slowly and said, "Just what's so odd about the hi-jacking?"

"For one thing, the first two loads and the trucks seem to have vanished. That's not standard. For a second thing, there seems to be a pretty direct pipeline to the hi-jackers from inside the company. For a third, hi-jackers don't usually kill people if they can help it, and if they do they don't usually leave the loot behind."

She smoked some more, the heavy perfume of the cigarette filling the room. "Yes, I've thought about it. There is something damned strange about it all. What does it mean to you, Mr. Shayne?"

"I don't know, but it's got the smell of someone either trying to wreck the company, or maybe even someone inside trying to get money

without destroying McBride, since he is insured."

She nodded thoughtfully. "The first would be Fred McBride himself, and I don't believe that, even though Fred might have a reason."

"His wife has the money? She might divorce him?"

Salome Varga nodded. "She has the money, from her father. I don't know if she wants a divorce or not. As for someone wanting to wreck the company, I doubt it."

"And my third idea?"

She smiled. "I guess you might mean me. Right?"

"A pretty woman who's assistant manager of a trucking company is an unusual person in the first place. Cynthia McBride says you want money and power. The proceeds from the hi-jacking, plus the damage to McBride Transport, could set you up."

"I suppose it could, but you'll have to prove it, won't you?" Salome Varga said.

"There's another angle," Shayne said. "If McBride loses his money by losing Cynthia it's possible by hi-jacking himself, or having you do it, he gets both insurance and loot—plus you. Then the two of you run the company. It'd be a nice way to get McBride, money and power."

"Clever of me, and if I thought of it I might have done it," Salome Varga said. "But you've still got to prove it."

"Okay," Shayne said, "you said

you'd thought of how odd the hi-jacking was. What does it mean to you?"

She stubbed out her cigarette, stood, and walked to a window. She looked out. "I've been wondering about Pete Evans, the driver who was killed. I knew Peter a little. As you said, a pretty woman being assistant manager is odd in a trucking company. One of the reasons is the men—they tend to be skirt-chasers. Well, Pete was a skirt-chaser. He tried my skirt, and I had to put him down. He didn't like it. He was a woman-crazy boy."

"You think someone took his chasing you too seriously?"

"Maybe," she said, "but I didn't mean me. Pete ran in some bad company. I know that. He had more money than a truck driver should have."

"You think he knew the hi-jackers, and they killed him?"

"Again, maybe. Pete was a strange one in some ways. He was a chaser, but there was something on his mind, something that bothered him. I'd almost say he was scared when he first came to us. He seemed to relax later, but he had something hanging over him."

"How do I know you're not making it up?"

"You don't," Salome Varga said, turned, "and now I'm busy. If you've got anything else, spit it out or go."

Shayne went.

IX

BUT MIKE SHAYNE didn't go far. He went to his car and drove off, in case Salome Varga was watching, but parked around the first corner, because he had a strong feeling that the woman had been anxious to get rid of him. He walked back to where he could watch the front of the apartment complex.

He smoked two cigarettes before he saw what he was looking for—Lars Jensen hurrying from his car, glancing around as if automatically to be sure he wasn't being watched, and vanishing into the apartment complex. Shayne dropped his cigarette and went after the manager of McBride Hauling Transport.

He didn't have to follow. He knew where Jensen was going. So he worked around until he was outside the windows of apartment 32. The voices were muffled, but the redhead could hear them clear enough. Salome Varga was being cool, hard. Jensen's voice whined.

"I got to know what you're doing, Salome," Jensen said.

"No you don't," Salome Varga said. "I've told you, Lars. We had some fun, but I'm not getting serious with you or anyone."

Jensen's voice rose. "You'd get serious with McBride if he got rid of Cynthia! Money, that's all you want!"

"Not at all, Lars," her cold voice said.

"All right, you want power, position. I know that, too. Why do you think I've worked so hard, made plans?"

"Go away, Lars. You're too old, too nothing. I told you at the start I wasn't getting mixed up with you."

"You'd rather have McBride? Or is it the young kid?"

"Get out of here, Lars!"

"You like 'em young, don't you, Salome? Was that what was bothering Pete Evans? You had your hooks into him? Why was he killed, Salome?"

Shayne listened to the long silence. He heard no sounds at all, not even breathing. He could visualize the two of them just standing there staring at each other. It was the woman who broke the silence first.

"I thought maybe you could tell me, Lars," she said. "I know you've got those plans of yours. You need money, right?"

"Don't try it, Salome," Jensen's voice said harshly. "I know that trick; I've been around too long. I don't know why Evans was killed, but I know he had something hanging over him. I know he liked the girls maybe too much, and he wasn't the marrying kind."

"Did you think I'd marry a punk like Evans? You are crazy."

"Maybe," Jensen said, and his voice changed again, the pleading whine coming back. "McBride isn't for you, Salome. He'll never let Cynthia divorce him, not with her money."

"Go away, Lars."

Another silence. Shayne strained to hear. There was the sound of movement, the rustling of female garments, and then a loud slap of hand against flesh.

Shayne waited. He heard breathing. Then a bumping sound as if someone had stumbled against a piece of furniture. Footsteps going away and a door closing.

Shayne slipped away from the window and sprinted out of sight back to the street. Moments later Lars Jensen came out and headed for his car. Shayne ran to his car, When the manager of the trucking company drove past, Shayne followed him.

Jensen drove straight to the McBride Hauling Transport warehouse. Shayne had no trouble following the manager, who drove steadily without looking back. At the warehouse, Shayne let Jensen go in first, and then parked and strode in after the manager.

In the office, Jensen looked up as Shayne walked in. The manager was shuffling papers as if he had been busy all morning. Shayne sat on the edge of Jensen's desk.

"What's on your mind, Shayne?" Jensen said:

"Busy?" Shayne said.

Jensen nodded, "Never a dull moment."

Shayne lit a cigarette, smoked, and watched the manager. Jensen stared back, a certain uneasiness growing in his eyes.

"I talked to Salome Varga," Shayne said.

"Good for you," Jensen said. "It's her day off. She can talk to anyone she likes."

"How long have you been after her, Jensen?"

The manager twisted a paper clip.

"That's none of your damned business."

"No, it's not," Shayne agreed, "but your plans are. What plans have you got, Jensen?"

Jensen straightened the paper clip. "You get around, don't you, Shayne?"

"It's my job. You want to tell me, or do I have to dig it out on my own?"

The manager considered. He was watching Shayne carefully, twisting and straightening the paper clip. He swivelled to look out through the glassed sides of the office at the bustle of action in the dim interior of the warehouse. Finally he nodded.

"Okay, I'll tell you. I've wanted my own trucking outfit for a long time. I don't like working for McBride much. He's not my kind of trucker. He doesn't know the business a tenth as well as I do, and he doesn't tend to business enough. His wife's money made a bum out of him."

"How do you figure on getting your own company? McBride doesn't pay you that much."

"How I get the money and the plant is my business. I told you my

plans. I didn't even ask how you found out I had plans."

"It's my business when I can't see where it could come from. It's funny, but that whole hi-jacking operation has a smell, and when I start thinking about the possibilities, I come up with some interesting thoughts."

"Such as?" Jensen asked, his eyes wary.

"Well now," Shayne said, smoked. "If I knew the trucking business real well, and I didn't have money, and I worked for another trucker who didn't keep his mind on his business so good, I figure I could get some money, and maybe get an operating company at the same time. I mean, let's say I set up some hijacking.

"I set up the hi-jacks so I can get some money by selling the loot. At the same time I cause McBride a lot of trouble, and hit him hard in his capital. Too many hi-jacks, and his insurance rates go up so high he has a hard time operating. Then maybe he gets tired of it all. That's when I offer to buy it off his hands for a steal price."

Jensen shrugged. "It might work. McBride's heart isn't in the business any more. Only there's two things wrong with it. One, I don't hi-jack. Two, McBride isn't about to sell out to me or anyone else. The company's his way of getting Salome some day. He wants to get rid of his wife, make Salome manager, and make her marry him."

"Salome wants the company?"



"Her mouth waters," Jensen said. "She's a funny woman. She has this thing about dominating men, beating men, running them. Bossing a bunch of truckers makes her nostrils itch, Shayne."

"Women like that are usually pretty frigid specimens."

"And Salome isn't." Jensen said, smiled. "There's always exceptions. She likes the boys, especially nice young ones, green and eager."

Shayne stubbed out his cigarette. "How do you figure on getting the money, Jensen? Make me believe you."

"I don't care what you believe. But if you want to know, I'm getting a partner. He's got the money, I've got the experience. I'm a good in-

vestment. But you're right about one thing. If the hi-jacking gets any worse, McBride maybe has to sell out, and I'll buy."

"What's the name of your money man?"

He stays out of this, you understand? You don't get his name out of me."

Shayne nodded. "If that's the way you want it. What do you know about Pete Evans?"

"Nothing. He was a fair driver, not the best."

"What was wrong with him?"

"A punk kid who didn't keep his mind on the work enough."

"Women?"

"That's how I figure it."

"Including Salome Varga?" Shayne snapped.

Jensen paled. "You got a lousy mind, Shayne!"

Shayne stood up. "Maybe, but that's because I meet so many lousy people. You want the Varga woman yourself, don't you? It looks like everyone does—the bitch-female in the man's world. Only she likes them young—or rich. I wonder how jealous you can be."

"I didn't touch Evans!"

"No? Well, then you've got nothing to worry about."

Shayne smiled his wolf smile as he turned and left the office. He could sense Jensen watching him as he walked down into the warehouse.

The vast building was all but deserted—lunch time. Shayne walked through the dim interior, his foot-

steps echoing in the hollow space. He passed into the garage, equally silent and dim and deserted at lunch time and headed for the street where he had parked his car.

A movement caught his eye.

A quick, furtive movement in the almost-dark interior of the garage, off in a far corner where—where the truck that had been attacked last night was parked and isolated by the police!

Someone was moving around the death truck!

X

MIKE SHAYNE stopped and looked back at the truck. All right, someone was moving around the truck. Why not? There was no reason the truck shouldn't be touched as long as it wasn't moved. Or was there?

The movement he had seen had been quick, as if the mover did not want to be seen. Why?

The police had found nothing in the truck.

Had they looked?

Shayne rubbed at his gaunt jaw, his mind working furiously. The 'something' he had seen or not seen back there at the spot of the hi-jack gnawed at his brain. What the hell was it? And did it have something to do with the truck?

No, not yet—it wouldn't come, but if someone was sneaking around the truck, then maybe there was something still there to be found?

Shayne walked on slowly as if he

hadn't really noticed anything. The instant he was behind another truck and out of sight from last night's truck, he slipped into the darkest shadows along the wall of the garage, and began to work his way back.

He moved with the soft grace of cat, with amazing silence for such a big man. His gray eyes watched the dim garage, seeking the slightest movement on the ground below.

When he reached within some ten yards of the truck in its dim corner, he stopped and flattened against the wall. For a beat of ten he saw nothing. Then there was a faint movement.

A shadow moved.

Only a shadow; he could see nothing more. Whatever, or whoever it was seemed to be made entirely of some black substance, without face or hands to catch the feeble rays of light that penetrated into the corner.

The shapeless figure climbed up into the cab of the truck. There was no light. Whoever it was knew what he or she was looking for and exactly where to find it without need of any light.

The little something gnawed again at Shayne's mind—something out on that dark road that had been wrong! It had some connection in his groping mind to the fact that the dark shadow in the truck cab was looking for something he, or she, knew was there.

Knew what and where—and there could only be one explanation

for that: the dark shadow had put whatever it was in the cab in the first place!

One of the hi-jackers who had hidden something?

That made little sense, and Shayne's gray eyes continued to watch the furtive movements in the truck cab. Then the shadow emerged and jumped down from the cab.

Shayne moved.

He moved fast, like a great cat leaping, and had almost reached the shadowy figure when it looked up.

It had no face!

No face, no hands, no shape at all, just a shapeless black mass with arms and thick, loose legs, and holes where its face should have been.

Then it was gone.

Shayne lunged forward, and the thick figure was already at the back of the truck, gone around the rear and out of sight. Shayne ran to the rear of the truck.

Something seemed to sigh in the air, a wave of sharp wind. Shayne instinctively ducked, fell backwards, and the murderous metal bar missed his head, banging against his legs as he fell backwards.

He clawed out his automatic.

The shapeless figure lashed out with a foot and kicked the big automatic out of Shayne's hand, kicked again at his head.

Shayne got his big hands on the foot, on a hard but not thick ankle, and heaved. The shapeless figure went down in a mess of arms and legs already struggling to get up.

Shayne was up and on the faceless figure.

Feet hit him in the chest and he hurled over the figure's head, propelled by his own weight in the judo maneuver.

Shayne hit hard on his left shoulder and skidded ten feet on the greasy floor. He banged to a halt against another truck. Swearing, he untangled himself and got up.

He whirled, but the shapeless black figure was already vanishing out a side door of the garage some fifty yards away. Cursing himself, Shayne got to the side door and ran through. He stopped. The street was empty, and some thirty yards away a small, gray car was pulling away and was gone.

The redhead stood in the sun licking a trickle of blood from his right hand where he had cut it at sometime during the melee. A man—or a strong woman. He could not be sure.

Someone in a shapeless pair of too-large coveralls, and a black mask, and black gloves. So—someone who didn't want to be recognized. Which meant someone who had reason to think that he, or she, would be recognized around the warehouse and garage. Someone known in the McBride Hauling garage.

Someone who had put some object into the cab of the truck, and had come to retrieve it. What? Shayne stood there in the afternoon sunlight and tried to think, but nothing would come.

Only one thing was clear. There was something even more add about the hi-jacking, and about the death of Pete Evans.

Was the hi-jacking a cover? Evans carrying something in the truck, something hidden in the cab of the truck?

The shapeless figure he had battled with had not hidden the 'something' in the cab, but had known where to find it because there was something else behind the hi-jacking? Unable to get it last night after killing Evans because Maddox was still alive, and because they had panicked?

Shayne tugged furiously on his ear. What if Pete Evans had been involved in something else—something that made him nervous and uneasy—and had tried to get away with something on the hi-jackers? They shot him, but at that moment couldn't find what they had come for because only Evans and one other person knew where it was?

One other person well known at McBride Hauling Transport?

Shayne hurried back into the building to a telephone.

XI

CHIEF WILL GENTRY chewed hard on the black stump of his cold cigar. Mike Shayne's gruff old friend eyed the redhead in the Chief's big office.

"Pete Evans? You think he has a record, Mike?"

"It crossed my mind, Will."

Gentry scowled. "I don't like the smell of that whole hi-jack setup, I admit. The boys passed it up to me because they're stumped. It just isn't following the normal pattern for a hi-jack, not by professionals. Our stoolies have heard nothing, no hint of hi-jackers operating, and that's not something that can usually be hidden."

"What about the fences?"

"Not a word, and that's really unusual. Two of the loads still haven't shown up at all, and the other hasn't given us a whisper after they found the truck. Two of the loads are odd-ball stuff, yes. Maybe they wouldn't fence the stuff through a normal fence, not electronic parts. But they should have unloaded the TV sets in the usual way—and not a smell."

Shayne lighted a cigarette and blew smoke into the sunny dust motes that shimmered in the sun of Gentry's office. "In other words, Will, nothing seems to be following normal, professional pattern, and on top of it they killed a driver, which is damned abnormal for professional hi-jackers."

"So you're wondering if the hijacking isn't a kind of cover for some other operation, with Evans in the middle of it?" Gentry asked.

"I'm wondering," Shayne said. "The rest of the deal looks professional enough, as if they wanted us to think it was all only hi-jacking. But it wasn't. It was something else,



Will, and I'm wondering about Pete Evans."

"Let's find out," Gentry growled.

The Chief pushed his intercom button and ordered a check on Peter Evans, with the various vital statistics taken from his file of the case, by the Criminal Identification Department. Shayne looked at his watch.

"That'll take some time," Shayne said.

"For a good check, yes," Gentry agreed.

"How about some lunch?"

Gentry sighed. "Can't do it, Mike. Lunch with the Mayor. That's the way it goes these days."

"The city's gotten a lot bigger," Shayne said. "Okay. I'll come back in about an hour."

"If I'm not here, see O'Brien down at C.I." Gentry said.

Shayne went out and had his lunch. He thought about what it could be that he couldn't remember, and about the listener who had bugged his apartment this morning. And he thought about hi-jackers who murdered a driver and forgot the loot, and about a shapeless shadow in the McBride garage.

Before he had finished his lunch he was thinking about McBride, his wife, Salome Varga, who seemed to have just about everyone hanging around her skirts, and Lars Jensen, a man with plans. He was still thinking about them all when he returned to police headquarters. Gentry wasn't back.

Lieutenant O'Brien greeted him when he walked in Criminal Identification. 'Long time, Mike. You don't use us much.'

"I usually know who I'm up against," Shayne grinned. "What about Pete Evans?"

"Well," O'Brien said slowly, "he's not exactly clean. We've got a sheet on him, but I don't think it's going to help you much."

"What kind of sheet?"

"Juvenile stuff mostly. A couple of car-thefts that were reduced because the kid was really only joy-riding. Seems Evans liked the girls pretty early, came from a poor family, and lifted cars just to impress his chicks when he called for them."

"Anything else? Smuggling, for instance? Dope?"

"Nope. A few petty larcenies, also

juvenile, and he did a couple of years as a juvenile. Since he grew up about all he got picked up for was brawls, and two charges of contributing to the immorality of minors, both dropped, no evidence."

"A hot pants boy," Shayne said. "And that's it? No hint of involvement with anything bigger or organized?"

"Nothing, Mike. Sorry."

Shayne rubbed at his chin. "I don't know. There's something about all this I don't like. No record of con jobs, the badger game maybe? The kind of stuff girl-chasers like him get into?"

"Not a whisper."

Shayne nodded thoughtfully. "You have his last address?"

"Sure."

"I'll take it," Shayne said. "You're certain Evans didn't have any trouble the last year or so that might be worrying him?"

"Nothing to worry him on our record. He owed us nothing."

"Okay, Sam, and thanks."

Shayne took the address given to him by O'Brien and left the building. Out in the afternoon sun he thought for a time before walking slowly to his car. Pete Evans had no record of the kind of criminal involvement Shayne was looking for—but there was a first time for everyone.

Shayne got into his car and drove off to the last known address of Pete Evans.

It turned out to be a small beach cottage in a secluded, rundown area

not far from one of the more fashionable areas of the city, as if Pete Evans had liked to live near where the big action was, even if he couldn't afford it.

Shayne parked beside the silent house and got out of his car. He saw the flash of reflected sunlight at the corner of the cottage.

He saw the arm, the hand, and the pistol.

He dove into the dirt, rolled in sand, and slid behind the wheel of his car. His automatic was out, aimed at the corner of the house.

XII

NOTHING MOVED in the afternoon sun.

Shayne waited, his breath coming hard but slow.

Nothing happened.

Then Shayne saw the car, a black sedan, parked in a grove of palms some twenty feet from the cottage. The man behind the cottage couldn't escape without coming into the open.

"You!" Shayne called. "You can't get me, and you can't get away without me getting a clear shot! Come out! Hands up, and toss the gun out first."

There was a short silence, and then a laugh!

A voice, "Shayne? That you?"

Shayne swore. "Maddox?"

Still laughing, Dirk Maddox stepped out from behind the cottage, his hand tucking his pistol away

in his shoulder holster. The insurance detective advanced across the sand with a sheepish expression.

"Damn, I should have recognized you. I thought I had someone coming for Evans."

"And I didn't know what I had," Shayne said. "You're still checking out Evans?"

"Drew a blank on fences and my stoolies, so that's all I've got to do," Maddox said. "Not that I've gotten far."

"The police drew blanks on the hi-jackers, too," Shayne said. "What have you dug up on Evans?"

"Nothing," Maddox said. "Absolute zero. No adult record that helps."

"I know that," Shayne said.

"Just nothing that points to him being anything except a kid truck driver. His father's his only relative, and the old man's a lush. No help at all. Pete looks like a pretty dull boy."

"Dull?" Shayne asked, watched Maddox.

Maddox blinked. "You mean the women? Hell, the guy liked women. What's unusual about that? I got a hint he was even making a play for that Varga woman, the assistant manager, but who wouldn't? And she didn't give him a tumble."

Shayne nodded. "What about the house here?"

"I just got here. Let's take a look together. It's a pretty shabby shack from the look of it."

Shayne agreed; the two detectives

went inside. The door wasn't locked. The reason was clear when they got inside—there was nothing in the two rooms worth stealing. They searched together. After fifteen minutes Maddox looked at Shayne.

"Pretty bare, Shayne. If Pete boy was mixed up with any hi-jackers, there sure isn't any sign of it in here."

"There isn't a sign of much in here. Evans lived pretty light," Shayne said. "I don't know, Maddox. I think we're missing something. Evans was a chaser. Where's his address book? Where are all his papers?"

"Evans was a kid. Maybe he didn't bother with such things, Maddox said.

"Let's give it one more try. Split up. You take the bedroom, I'll look out here in the living room."

Maddox nodded, and went into the bedroom. Shayne could hear him tearing up the bed, ransacking the closet. The redhead himself stood in the center of the living room and let his gray eyes study the room slowly section by section.

There was no desk. The drawers of the two tables had already been searched. There was only one stuffed chair and he'd pulled it apart himself, had dug into every crevice. The straight wooden chairs offered no hiding places. The television set had been examined, and so had the record player.

The redhead walked to the record rack. He began taking out the single

records one by one. He saw the gap between two records. It wasn't an address book hidden between the records—it was a thin bundle of letters. No more than four. But when Shayne opened the first one he knew he'd hit paydirt.

"What is it?" Maddox said over his shoulder.

"Four letters, covering a year," Shayne said. "Someone hid them, Maddox, and I've got a hunch why."

"Blackmail?"

"It's got the smell. Take a look."

Maddox read two letters. "Love letters sure enough, and pretty hot. The little punk!"

Maddox was pale as he read the letters. The woman who had written them had a passionate vocabulary. In three of the letters she begged Evans to come to her, and told him to burn the letters. He hadn't, but that wasn't what Shayne pointed to.

"Look at the signature," Shayne said:

"Maddox looked. "Cynthia. So? It's a pretty common name."

"Not when you read the letters the way they talk about the 'boss.' No, those were written by only one special Cynthia, Cynthia McBride!"

"McBride's wife? I didn't know that was her name."

"It is."

Maddox chewed a finger, looked at the letters. "McBride? Jealous, so he had his hi-jackers kill Evans?"

"Maybe, or maybe Cynthia herself wanted out. Maybe she used Evans to set up the hi-jacking, then

ordered him killed. Damn it, it never made much sense for professional hi-jackers to shoot Evans down. But if someone wanted Evans out of the way, and paid the hi-jackers to do it, it makes sense."

Maddox nodded. "How do you want to handle it?"

"Talk to the woman," Shayne said. "See what she has to say."

"Okay," Maddox agreed. "Only I think maybe I'd like to talk to McBride, and at the same time. Maybe ask around first, see if McBride knew what was going on."

"Okay," Shayne agreed. "I'll take Cynthia."

"Right. Keep in close touch. It looks to me like we'll have to set the ball rolling, and then stake out to see who jumps and which way."

"That's about it."

Shayne watched the insurance detective go out to his car. He waited until Maddox had driven off, and then he looked around the cottage once more. Something more was bothering him now. Who had hidden the letters in the record cabinet rack? It didn't seem like a likely place to hide valuable letters.

But there was something more important now—Cynthia McBride. There was more going on than anyone had revealed, and it was time he found out all there was. Maybe Maddox could scare McBride enough to flush him out if he was behind it all.

If not, Shayne had to dig the truth from Cynthia McBride.

XIII

THE BEAUTIFUL woman greeted him beside the pool again. The ex-pug butler hadn't been friendly with McBride himself not at home, but the woman had over-ruled her watchdog. The butler retired under protest, and the woman stretched like a tanned tiger in her bikini, and enjoyed Mike Shayne's eyes on her.

"I hope it was me you came back for," she said.

"It was," Shayne said.

"Um, groovy! Sit down and drool a while. I like men who drool."

"Especially young ones? You and Salome Varga?"

She sat up, her eyes blazing. "Don't mention that power-hungry bitch to me! You hear? She can have Fred McBride any time she wants, any time he'll let me divorce him! I'm sick of him."

"Did you get sick of Pete Evans? Or did he get sick of you?"

She laughed again, lay back on her beach towel, closed her eyes. "My you do have a one-track mind. And here little Cynthia thought you'd come back to ogle and lust after her."

Shayne said, "I've read the letters."

This time she didn't move. Her eyes didn't open. But she had been hit dead center. "What letters?"

"Evans saved them. For what? Blackmail? What did you do, arrange with the hi-jackers to have him killed?"

She didn't scream, or rage, or jump up, or protest. She simply opened her eyes, and Shayne saw that behind the magnificent body and the expensive tan she was just a woman who needed to be loved. Needed real love, and, like most women, on her terms, not on the terms of men.

"So he kept them? That's the nicest thing I've heard in a long time. Maybe he wanted more than usual from me after all. Funny, I really fell for the stupid kid, and he was the last man I'd ever have expected to want more than he could get in bed."

"Is he why you wanted a divorce from McBride?"

"In a way," she said, and sat up now, lighted a cigarette. "I'm a dreamer, like all women. We want the man who makes us shiver to want us all the way, for gentle love. Aren't we stupid? The only reason men and women need each other at all is sex, yet all women live their lives denying that instead of just plain accepting it.

"Why just in a way?"

"Because I'm not stupid. Pete wasn't going to marry me except for money, and I'd never have let him do that. No, I want my divorce just because I'm tired. Tired of Fred McBride and his needs, ambitions, schemes and ego."

"But you wouldn't have liked blackmail."

"Pete didn't blackmail me."

"Do you think McBride had him killed?"

She smoked, looked at the mammoth pool as if it were the ocean itself and she could see far off to the horizon. "I don't know. I've thought about it. Fred would never divorce me, or let me divorce him, as long as he needed my money behind him to help his business prosper. It's possible he wanted Pete dead, and possible he might try to get money with some scheme."

"But you don't think so?"

She was silent for a time. "I wouldn't put anything past Fred, but I give Salome credit for a lot of brains. She wants Fred and the business. She'll marry Fred to get the business, and she'll take the business from him sooner or later. I don't see her risking hi-jacking, or letting Fred risk it. And Pete would have been something she would use. She'd want Pete to make me divorce Fred. Pete alive would be more useful to her."

"If you wanted Pete enough, maybe you'd finally divorce McBride?"

"That's more her style, yes."

Shayne considered. Somehow he believed the woman. "Someone killed Evans, Cynthia, and not by accident. I'm sure of that now. He died for a reason. Did he tell you anything the last year that showed he was involved in anything with some gang? Some criminal operation his truck was useful for?"

"No," she said, "but—" She stopped, and Shayne waited. She

looked around as if to find help. There wasn't any help; only the blind and merciless sun, and the smooth blue pool as hard as ice.

"I'm not sure what it was all about, Shayne, but Pete was a scared, shaken man when I met him. He changed during the year, got some of his brashness back, but never completely. I sensed something hanging over him the whole time we had our affair going. Sometimes I'd wake up and find him sitting and staring into space, a kind of horror in his eyes."

"You know what was bothering him?"

She shook her head. "Not specifically, but from some things he said from time to time I knew he'd had some kind of trauma, a very rough experience, not too long before he came to me. Over some girl, of course. Whatever it was it haunted him, and it also seemed to make him physically afraid."

"Someone after him?"

"I think it was something like that," Cynthia McBride said, "only maybe not immediate pursuit, you understand? More like he was somehow afraid of a faceless force that was going to reach out and destroy him no matter what he did."

"Do you know anything about what it was? Who the girl was, if it was a girl?"

"No, except that maybe twice he made a kind of oblique remark about never mixing with Irish girls. All Irish girls are crazy, he said. You



never know what an Irish girl will do. I thought at first he was talking about me, even though I'm not Irish. Fred is, but not me. Only he wasn't talking about me."

"And that's all? Irish girls are crazy?"

"That's all I can tell you."

Shayne nodded, and thanked her. He started to walk away. Behind him she said: "Shayne?"

"Yes?" he turned.

"Find who killed Pete. It wasn't me, and I miss Pete. He was a vulgar nothing, but I really needed him."

Shayne had no answer. He went back out to his car. As he drove away, he was aware of the ex-pug butler watching him from the steps of the mansion, and he knew, sud-

denly, that the butler had been talking to someone about him.

Warning McBride, probably. That didn't make him feel better. He remembered the listener at his apartment, and the shapeless shadow in the garage. He had the strong feeling that whatever he did, he was not doing it alone. Someone was watching his every move.

But there was nothing he could do about that. He had to find a killer.

XIV

THE ADDRESS Mike Shayne got from Lieutenant O'Brien for Pete Evans' father was a slum apartment house in the worst section of Miami. It was an area of drifters, winos and the assorted scum of the city. Jack Evans, from what he had heard, fitted most of those categories.

He parked in the street, locking his car carefully as greedy eyes watched him all along the crowded sidewalk in the late afternoon sun. He found no mailbox in the shabby vestibule of the tenement with Jack Evans' name on it. That wasn't a shock—almost none of the battered boxes in the run-down building entrance had any names on them. People in this slum didn't expect much mail, and most of them would rather not advertise where they lived.

The place would be run more like a rooming house, with the manager or superintendent taking mail, phone calls, and acting as a watchdog over

his furtive guests. Shayne found the super.

"Jack Evans? Sure, he's up in 3-C. You a cop?"

"Private."

"About his kid?"

"That's right. You knew Pete Evans?"

"Not much. He come around sometimes. A wise kid who thought he was hell-on-wheels, and him just a lousy truck driver. A couple of years ago he went to college a while, but he couldn't make it, not him. Used to come around more then, looking for a handout from the old man." The super laughed. Imagine a kid dumb enough to think Jack Evans ever had any money to give out except for a bottle?"

"Did they ever fight?"

"All the time. Some bad ones about a year and a half ago. The kid was in some kind of bind, I figure. Jack just about threw him out more'n once then."

"Is Jack in?"

"Sure is, only maybe not for what you want. This time o' day, Jack's usually out cold if he found the price of a bottle."

"You got a key?"

"Sure. I'll go up with you."

The super got his master keys, and followed Shayne up the filthy broken stairs to the third floor. The super pointed to a closed door with the colorless paint peeling in strips from it. Shayne heard small feet scurrying at his approach. Rats. He

shivered a little, and knocked on Jack Evans' door.

There was no answer.

He knocked harder. There was still no answer. Shayne started to turn to the super for the key when he saw the lock.

The edges of the door and frame were splintered just at the lock. Raw, pale wood showed where the wood had ripped and not long ago. Shayne glanced at the super.

"Stay back."

He drew his automatic. He heard the eager intake of the super's breath—the gun was a thing of excitement.

Shayne pushed the door open.

It moved slowly, creaking, on rusty hinges, and seemed to take forever to swing fully open. Shayne looked in through the gap between the door and the frame to see behind the door. There was nothing behind the door.

Shayne stepped in, the super crowding behind him. Shayne put away his pistol. The room was small, bare, with nowhere to hide. Shayne wasn't going to need his pistol.

"God!" the super croaked.

Shayne strode into the room.

Jack Evans lay on the floor. A pool of still wet blood spread from under his small, unshaven form. Shayne didn't need a doctor to tell him what had happened. The man had been shot twice in the chest at close range.

"Is it Evans?" Shayne asked without turning.

"Sure is," the super croaked. "I didn't hear nothing!"

"Silencer," Shayne said.

His gray eyes took in the story at a glance. There was an almost full bottle of good whisky on the table, with two glasses. One of the glasses was still half full. The other lay empty on its side.

Jack Evans would talk to anyone who brought a bottle of whisky as good as the one on the table. Only Evans had probably passed out when his killer had arrived, or the door would not have been broken in.

No, the killer arrived, got no answer, kicked in the door, and then revived Jack Evans and fed him good whisky. In a fog, Evans would have seen nothing but the whisky. But why had the killer bothered to revive his victim?

There was only one answer. The killer hadn't been sure he had to kill Evans, not until he asked some questions. Evans had given the wrong answer, had revealed himself as knowing something dangerous to the killer, and so had been killed. What had Evans known?

Shayne straightened up and looked around the room. He saw nothing at all.

"Get the police," Shayne said to the super. "Call the office of the Chief, tell him Mike Shayne's found a murder."

The super left, and Shayne began to search the room. He found nothing. Jack Evans had lived even

lighter than his son. There wasn't even a change of clothes. Everything Jack Evans had owned was on his back. And—

The moan hit Shayne like a slap. He whirled.

Jack Evans moaned again.

The man wasn't dead. Shayne stared in disbelief, and then hurried to the shot man and bent down.

"Evans? Who shot you?"

Evans made no answer. The man lay, weakly, the last gasp of a man who should have been dead, and who would soon be. Dying, Jack Evans lay in a fog deeper than the fog of alcohol in which he had spent his life.

"Jack! Who shot you?"

The staring eyes saw nothing, and the dying ears heard nothing. Nothing outside his black-fogged brain. But inside, where the last spark of life still refused to die in the sodden brains, Evans was seeing something.

His lips moved. Blood bubbled in his throat. He moaned again, his head moved a bare inch.

"Evans?"

The already-dead eyes seemed to move as if, at last, Evans heard Shayne's voice. Not the words Shayne said, just his voice — the sound of Shayne's voice that told the dying brain that there was someone in the room with him.

Someone to hear him.

Evans's lips moved. "... var ... var ... Varga ... ask ... Sal ... Varga ..."'

The blood suddenly bubbled up

out of the whispering throat and the dying body stiffened.

"Evans?" Shayne said.

There was no answer, and the last blind light died out of the staring eyes. Evans was really dead now.

Shayne stood up slowly.

Varga. Salome Varga.

That was what the dead man had gasped, what Evans had had in his dying mind, held like a last vital message to be given with his final effort.

Why?

Shayne didn't think that Jack Evans had even heard his questions. Or had he? Was Evans saying that Salome Varga had killed him? Or was he saying something else entirely?

Whatever Jack Evans had tried to say, it had to be something important, vital, a lead to his killer.

If Salome Varga wasn't the killer herself, then Jack Evans must have thought that, somehow, she could say who was.

Shayne left the shabby, silent room where Jack Evans had lived and died. He had reported. He should stay and wait for the police. But he was in a hurry now.

XV

MIKE SHAYNE reached the garden apartment complex again just before five o'clock. He hurried to apartment 32. He hurried because on the way from where Jack Evans had

died, he had had a sudden chilling thought—if Salome Varga wasn't the killer, and if Jack Evans named her with his dying breath because she could, somehow, name the killer, then she could be next on the killer's list!

Jack Evans had died because he knew something the killer was afraid of. Maybe Salome Varga knew the same thing! And if the killer knew she knew, then he would have to kill her, too.

Or she could still be the killer herself, and Shayne had no time to waste.

There was no one around apartment 32, but the windows were open in the warm afternoon. Shayne drew his automatic, and slipped up to the window.

Inside he saw nothing at first. Then he saw her, Salome Varga. She was sitting at her dining room table, eating a snack and reading. There was no one else in the apartment as far as he could see. He holstered his automatic, and went around to the front door.

"Who is it?" her voice called.

"Shayne."

"Go away, Shayne. I've got nothing to say to you."

"Yes you do," he said through the door, aware of standing there alone. "I can get the police if you want, and if you don't talk to me, maybe you'll be talking to a killer."

There was a silence. Then light footsteps, and the door opened.

"Are you trying to scare me,

Mike Shayne?" Salome Varga said.

"I hope so," Shayne said, and walked inside. He turned on her as she closed the door behind her. "Where've you been all afternoon?"

"Does it matter?"

"Yeah, it matters. You want to tell me?"

He was watching her closely. She was fully dressed, and there was dust on her shoes. His left shoulder hung down an inch or two, his coat unbuttoned and ready.

"I've been here in the apartment all afternoon."

"Your shoes are dusty."

"I took out the garbage. The back yard isn't paved. You think I did something, Shayne?" Her eyes were hard and steady.

"Can you prove you were here?"

She thought for a time, then sat down, crossing her fine legs. "As a matter of fact, I suppose I can. I called to the office twice about faulty kitchen sink fixture. I had some groceries delivered. Fred McBride called me about an hour ago. My car hasn't been used; the garage attendant can prove that."

Shayne sat down. Salome Varga watched him steadily, neither anxious nor triumphant, just waiting to hear what he had come to see her about.

"Jack Evans was just shot."

"Evans? You mean Pete Evans's father?"

"Yes."

"Dead?"

"Yes."

"Do you know why?"

Shayne rubbed his jaw. "I think because he had something that would lead to who killed Pete, or knew something that would do the same thing."

"Pete was killed by hi-jackers."

"No, I don't think so. I never did like the hi-jacking. Now I think the hi-jacking never was real."

"What was it then?"

"A cover for murdering Pete Evans," Shayne said.

Salome Varga was silent for a full minute. She looked away from Shayne, looked out through her open window at the late afternoon sun of Miami. She seemed to sigh, as if sometimes the ways of the world were too much for her. Shayne waited, his big face expressionless.

"That's a pretty elaborate scheme just to kill a nothing punk," Salome Varga said.

"Elaborate, but I think necessary. I think whoever killed Pete knew that he would be an instant suspect unless he could hide the fact that Pete had been murdered. He had to cover up the killing as something else: a killing by obvious hi-jackers."

She said slowly. "You said I could be talking to a killer. Why? Why have you come to me?"

"Jack Evans lived longer than the killer expected, a mistake. He was nearly dead, and not very rational, but he managed to gasp out a name —your name. I think he was trying to tell me that you knew something."

"Do you? What would I know?"

"You tell me, Salome. I think you know something about Pete that maybe leads to his killer. I'm not sure you even know you know, but Jack Evans knew."

"What would I know about Pete?" she said, but it was a hollow set of words. Her voice told Shayne that she knew.

"You better tell me, Salome."

She sighed. "What's to tell? About two years ago I met Pete. We had a brief fling: I dropped him. Then Cynthia saw him, got to know him. I saw a chance to maybe break Fred McBride away from her, so I pushed Pete on her. I even slipped Pete some money so he could squire her around. He owed me plenty, and he liked Cynthia anyway, so he did a good job. I think it might have worked if he hadn't gotten killed."

"Why did he owe you plenty?"

"Why?" she said, frown ed . "Around the time I first met him he needed some money. Fair-sized money. I lent it to him." She laughed. "Lent! I was still pretty dumb, I guess. You didn't lend Pete money, you gave it, period."

"What did he need the money for. Some girl? An Irish girl?"

She arched an eyebrow. "You're a pretty fair detective, aren't you? Yes, he was in some kind of bind over a girl, and she was Irish, I suppose. He was pretty shaken up for a couple of months about it. I asked him a couple of times how it had come out, but he never would say."

"What kind of trouble was it?"

"Who knows?" she said, and became thoughtful again. "I'll say one thing, Pete never seemed quite the same after it. He was, well, nervous, almost—"

"Scared?"

"Yes, almost scared. He seemed to get over it slowly. He was almost back to his old, arrogant self the last month."

"Why do you think the girl was Irish?"

"Her name sounds Irish."

Shayne leaned forward, eyes alert. "You know her name?"

"Yes, Pete mentioned it: Agnes Reilly."

"You're sure?"

"Yes. I saw a kind of bracelet she gave him, inscribed with his name and her name: A.R. to P.E. I asked him what A.R. stood for, and he told me: Agnes Reilly."

"Who knows you know this?"

"No one, I shouldn't think. My relations with Pete weren't broadcast. I kept it pretty quiet. Even if anyone knew I'd played around with Pete, they wouldn't know I knew anything about the girl. They'd figure just the opposite, right?"

"But Jack Evans thought you'd know," Shayne said, stood up. "He had to know. Maybe Pete told him once, about your lending the money, anyway. Pete told him you'd lent Pete the money to cover his trouble with Agnes Reilly, and Jack figured that you had to know who Agnes Reilly was."



Salome nodded slowly. "And the man who killed Jack Evans, and Pete, is connected to the girl."

"That's all that makes sense now," Shayne said. He looked down at the assistant manager. "Which means you're probably safe, because the killer doesn't know you know anything. He probably doesn't know you lent Pete Evans money. But that's all only probably. You better stay locked up here for a while."

"I'm not going anywhere, Shayne," Salome Varga said.

"I'll send you a cop anyway, to watch your door."

"All right, but find your killer fast. I won't stay cooped up for long just because someone might want to kill me."

"I'll find him fast," Shayne said as he left.

XVI

LIEUTENANT O'BRIEN was still on duty when Shayne walked into C.I. the second time that day.

"Can you run a check on a girl named Agnes O'Reilly? Not a criminal check. I wouldn't think she had a record. A crime check. Was she a victim of something."

"Sure. When and what happened to her?"

"It's only a guess, but say about two years ago. Maybe she was a missing person, or maybe she died."

"Will do. Take a seat," O'Brien agreed cheerfully.

Shayne took a seat. The sun was still bright outside in the early evening. Agnes Reilly. His mind raced as he thought about a girl in some kind of trouble, and Pete Evans needed money to get out of it. But Evans hadn't gotten out of it smoothly, no. For almost two years afterward Evans had been worried, uneasy, almost scared.

Shayne was prepared for a long wait, but O'Brien came back inside fifteen minutes. The Lieutenant carried a slip of paper. Shayne jumped up.

"Piece of cake," O'Brien said, and read from his paper. "Agnes

Mary Reilly, female Caucasian, nineteen years old. Student at the University."

"Where Pete Evans went for a time," Shayne said.

"Evans?" O'Brien said.

"Never mind, go on," Shayne said. "What happened?"

"Suicide, Mike. Just under two years ago. We fished her out of the Bay. Left a note: 'I offered love, he offers money.' That was all. She was pregnant, naturally. Damn, we get so many like that, or we did. Not so many now."

"No operation?"

"No."

"Who identified her? Claimed the body?"

"Her mother, Mrs. Samuel Reilly."

"What's the address of the mother?"

"Two years ago it was 1225 Western Road. That's out on the north side."

"Thanks," Shayne said.

In his car again he drove as fast as he could to 1225 Western Road. It was a pleasant ranch style house in a middle-class suburb. Shayne rang the bell. A tall, pretty woman answered.

"Yes?"

Too young! Shayne said, "You're not Mrs. Reilly."

"You're looking for Mrs. Reilly? I'm sorry. She sold us the house almost two years ago. Her daughter died, and—"

"Do you know where she went?"

"Well, yes, I do. Is it important?"

"Very important," Shayne said. "A police matter, and two murders."

The tall woman paled. "Come in. She left an address in case we needed to get in touch. I have it somewhere."

Shayne stood just inside the door, unable to keep still. The woman seemed to be gone for an hour, but it was less than five minutes.

"Yes, here it is: 987 Perdido Street."

Shayne's thanks drifted back as he sprinted for his car.

He drove fast back across Miami to the lower middle class apartment area where 987 Perdido was a tall, yellow-brick apartment house. He could not find the name of Reilly on the mail box. Swearing, he pressed the manager's button. A small, peppery man answered the door.

"I'm looking for Mrs. Samuel Reilly," Shayne snapped. "Police."

"Moved out six months ago."

"Where to?"

"It won't help you," the manager said.

"Why not?"

"She died two months later. Moved out of here to go to a hospital. You go into a hospital, you never come out. Never get me into a hospital."

"What about her husband?"

"Didn't have one. She told me he'd been dead a couple of years

before she moved in here. She'd been living with her daughter, but the kid died, too."

"Did she leave anything here when she went into the hospital?" Shayne asked.

The manager shook his head. "Nope, gave it all away. Knew she was dying, I guess. Nice woman, had a lot of bad luck. Said her luck had always been bad. Found a good man at last, and he died. Then the kid. Then—"

"At last?" Shayne said. "She found a good man at last? But her daughter was nineteen."

"Reilly wasn't her first husband. The girl wasn't his, she told me that much. She was a lonely woman near the end, I guess. Used to sit at home mostly, except when she went to visit the kid's grave. She was proud of the grave, said it had a nice stone, even if the kid's father had to pay for it."

But Shayne had stopped listening. Something had clicked in his head, the little something out on the dark road where Pete Evans had died. Suddenly, he knew what had been gnawing at his mind, what had been wrong out there at the hi-jack scene.

He knew what the masked figure at McBride's garage had been looking for in the cab of the hi-jack truck.

"Where is the grave?" he asked.

"St. Theresa's Cemetery."

Shayne hurried back to his car. He had his hunch, and he knew,

but he needed the final proof. He thought he would find it at the grave of Agnes Reilly.

On his way he stopped and called Will Gentry at Headquarters.

XVII

THE CARETAKERS AT St. Theresa's Cemetery was reluctant to show him the grave at first. "After hours, just closing," he said.

"The police will be here, if you want it official," Shayne said.

"Okay, okay. Don't get riled up. I'll show you."

The caretaker took him to a long aisle of headstones, and pointed into the distance. "Number 1299, on the right."

Shayne walked down the long row of stones in the fading sun of a warm Miami evening. He was almost reluctant. A girl had died two years ago, and now he had to punish her avenger. The daughter of a woman who had not had much of a life, and all too brief herself.

Now murder was to cap her sadness. He didn't think that Mrs. Samuel Reilly would have wanted Pete Evans dead, no matter what Evans had done to her daughter. But someone else had wanted Pete Evans dead, and had carefully made his plans. Now Shayne had to capture him. A man who could have been Shayne himself, if Shayne had ever had a daughter. But a man who had killed not only Pete Evans, but Jack Evans, and who would

have to kill again to hide what he had done.

Shayne reached the gravestone. He stood there in the sun and just looked at it. It was a big stone, expensive. The kind that said the people who put it up had loved the dead girl very much, and said, also, that maybe not enough had been given to the girl while she was alive.

The legend on the stone was simple:

AGNES MARY REILLY

In Memoriam

Died before she could have found a life to live. A gentle girl, who found life not gentle, and so died at the age of nineteen to find the tranquillity denied her in life.

Erected by her loving parents

Virginia M. Reilly

and

Shayne heard the noise behind him. A soft step, and the click of metal against stone. Shayne did not turn around.

"I should have known you'd track it down, Shayne."

The voice was low, quiet, and yet underneath it shook with a kind of agony. The man behind Shayne was looking at the dead girl's headstone, too.

Shayne still looked at the stone, without turning, and read the last name on the stone:

and

Dirk Maddox

"She killed herself, Maddox," Shayne said to the unseen man behind. "Evans didn't kill her."

"He killed her, Shayne, just as I killed him. How did you trace it?"

"Luck," Shayne said. "I never did feel right about the hi-jacking. You had to do too many unprofessional things."

He sensed Maddox nodding. "I couldn't risk fencing the stuff. The police can trace a fence, and stoolies can find out too much too easily. I had to just hide it. I didn't give a damn about the loot."

"Jack Evans didn't die fast enough. He tipped me to Salome Varga, and she remembered Agnes Reilly's name."

"Reilly, not Maddox. Why come here?"

"You made a mistake, Maddox," Shayne said. "Out on that road you said three hi-jackers shot Evans and you. You made it good so we didn't wonder about them leaving no trace. Cars that never left the highway and all that. But you forgot one thing."

"Did I? What was that?" Maddox's soft voice said behind the redhead.

"You were shot with a small caliber revolver. Your own gun, I'll bet, but we had no reason to check that. But the gun that killed Pete Evans was a .45; an automatic for sure. That was a good touch. You didn't have an automatic, as far as we knew. You used it on Pete, and

then hid it in the truck cab. That's what you came to get in the garage when we tangled."

"How did you figure that?" Maddox's voice was still soft and deadly, but there was something else in it now—interest. Maddox was a detective; his professional curiosity was aroused by the puzzle of how Shayne figured the gun had to be in the cab.

"No shells," Shayne said.

Maddox was silent. Finally he said, "What?"

"No shells, Maddox," Shayne said quietly, still not turning. As long as he didn't turn, move, Maddox wouldn't shoot, he was sure of that. "There were no shells on the ground anywhere near that truck. I saw it, but it didn't register until I began to wonder about Agnes Reilly's father. An automatic ejects shells, Maddox. Hi-jackers who'd just killed a man and run wouldn't have stopped to find three shells in the dark and pick them up."

Maddox didn't say anything at all this time.

"No," Shayne said, "the shells should have been there, near the truck. A .45 automatic has to be used pretty close. But there were no shells; so no hi-jackers. You shot Evans in the cab. The shells were in the cab. You picked them up, put them in your pocket, and hid the gun somewhere in the cab you'd prepared ahead of time. That was your mistake. You should have tossed the shells out. A mistake,

and there never were any hi-jackers.

"You made it all up. No one ever saw those hi-jackers that night — not them, or the black car, or the truck on the highway — because there weren't any hi-jackers. Just an illusion created by you. It was you alone who hi-jacked the other trucks, and hid them out. You only had time to unload the one truck and make it all look real. That was your other mistake. You were smart enough to know you had to work alone, but it left you having to risk the hi-jacking looking odd."

Another silence, then, "Nice, Shayne, very nice work. You're a good detective. Too bad."

"Why too bad?"

"Because it's your last case."

Shayne said quietly, "Me too, Maddox. You had to kill Pete Evans to avenge your daughter, not many people would blame you a whole lot. But then you had to kill Jack Evans to cover. Now me, to cover. Who else? Now you're a mad dog, Maddox."

"What else can I do, Shayne?"

"Take your punishment," Shayne said. "I'm turning, Maddox."

Shayne turned. The insurance detective stood there not twenty feet away, a small .32-caliber pistol in his hand and aimed at Shayne. Maddox was paler than death.

"I'm not going to jail, Shayne."

Shayne shrugged. "Yes you are, Maddox. Look around you."

For a long beat Maddox stared straight at Shayne, his pistol poised, finger on the trigger. Then, slowly, he turned his head left, then right, then looked straight at Shayne again, and dropped his pistol.

All around, Chief Gentry's men came out from behind the silent tombstones.

XVIII

IN THE DARK night, the lights of Chief Gentry's office were like an isolated island, detached, far from any reality. This was how Mike Shayne felt, and maybe it was more from inside than from outside. Unreal, isolated, detached from the world of rational men. Perhaps because he had in his life arrested many men, sent them to their doom, but not many had been detectives he had worked with.

All had been done, the wheels of retribution by the state and the people set in inexorable motion, and now Will Gentry and Shayne sat in the office and listened as Dirk Maddox smoked a cigarette.

"She was just nineteen, a nice kid," Maddox said. "I was a lousy father, I know that. Virginia divorced me, married Reilly. I was mad, hurt. I stayed away. I let them change Agnes's name. What did I care? I lost touch. Then it happened."

Maddox smoked. "She was at the University, met Pete Evans. He had a way, a dazzler. He's been around,

he knew women. She never had a chance. So she got pregnant. I guess she was just a little different from Evans's other conquests. He didn't just run out. He got money. He set it up with an abortionist."

Maddox stopped and seemed to stare inside himself. "I didn't know about it until it was pretty late. Virginia called me, told me. We hadn't talked for years. We're all no good, we men. I used the opportunity to try to get Virginia back! Damn me! I talked to Agnes. Of course, we didn't know she was pregnant, just that she was mixed up with a punk. I suppose I told her what Evans was. No sympathy, just hard facts! Swell!"

Maddox crushed out his cigarette. "So he had the money to get her fixed up. She was a soft girl, and I guess she loved the no good punk. When he offered her money and get rid of the kid, she wanted him, marriage, and she jumped. That's all. I swore I'd get him and I did."

The office was silent. Maddox stood up. His guard stepped forward to take him down to his cell.

Chief Gentry looked at his hands. Shayne looked at Maddox.

"And yourself," the Miami detective said.

Maddox blinked at the redhead. "What?"

"You got yourself too. Revenge and retribution on Evans, yes, and expiation for yourself. You failed her too, Maddox, right? You killed Evans to expiate your guilt, to destroy yourself, too."

Maddox shrugged. "That, too, I guess. Well, so long, Shayne. You're a good detective. I thought I might get away with it, but you were too good."

"No," Shayne said, "you didn't really expect to get away with it. You only made yourself believe you expected to. If you wanted to get away, you'd have done it better, simpler."

"Maybe I would have at that," Maddox said.

The insurance detective turned without another glance and walked out ahead of his guard. Mike Shayne and Will Gentry sat in silence in the bright room isolated in a world of darkness.

Next Month

KILLER OF THE GLADES — A NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

by BRETT HALLIDAY



AN ALMOST-PERFECT HIDING PLACE

by

BILL PRONZINI

I WATCHED Detective Lieutenant Schaeffer relight his dead cigar with a kitchen match. Smiling with his perpetual smug superiority, he said to the small, bespectacled man seated across the table, "I think you're lying, Mitchell."

"Really?" Mitchell answered calmly. "And why would I be lying?"

Schaeffer shrugged expansively, exhaling a cloud of rancid smoke.

"People do that," he said, "when they've committed murder."

"Murder?" Mitchell said, as if very much surprised. "You mean you believe I shot my wife?"

"Did you?"

*She was ugly and mean
and she talked too much.
But now she was dead.
I had a good idea who
had murdered her. Yet . . .*

"I have already told you what happened."

The three of us were grouped around the vinyl-topped table in a large, curtained alcove at the rear of Mitchell's small hobby shop. Through the opened curtains I could see the interior of the shop—the displays of airplane and boat and automobile models, the cluttered workbench behind the long counter on the left, the shelves of sailing vessels of all types in various sized bottles, the glass cases of inexpensive stamp and coin beginners' collections.

I could also see the chalked outline of the body of Mitchell's wife, Martha, that the men from the crime lab had drawn on the floor behind the counter. They were gone now, as were the police ambulance with the remains and the uniformed patrolmen, and the three of us were alone in the shop.

Schaeffer leaned back in his chair, lacing his hands across the huge girth of his middle. He weighed somewhere in the vicinity of three hundred pounds, and he had always reminded me of a fat and pedantic buddha. I had never told him that. Rookie detectives do not tell their superiors they resemble fat buddhas, not if they like their jobs. And I liked mine more than I disliked Schaeffer.

He said now, "Do you own a gun, Mitchell?"

"Yes," Mitchell answered.

"What calibre?"

"A .38, I believe."

"I'd like to see it."

"I am afraid that is impossible."

Schaeffer's smile grew. "Why?"

"It was stolen several weeks ago."

"You reported the theft, of course."

Mitchell colored slightly. "No."

"Why not?"

"I didn't think it necessary at the time. It was the only item taken. The cash is locked securely in the safe at night."

Schaeffer, I knew, was enjoying himself immensely. "Your wife was shot with a .38, Mitchell."

"I am sure there must be quite a few guns of that calibre in the city."

"Quite a few," Schaeffer agreed pleasantly. Then, "How did you get along with your wife, Mitchell?"

"To be quite frank, we didn't get along at all. Martha was a shrew, an abominable woman."

"A good motive for murder, wouldn't you say?"

"Quite good. However, that does not mean I killed her."

Schaeffer flicked dashes from his cigar onto the polished linoleum. Mitchell winced slightly, and Schaeffer smiled. "Tell us your version of what happened tonight."

"I have already told you three times."

"Tell us again."

Mitchell sighed. "Martha and I were about to close for the evening. It was nine o'clock. Martha was behind the counter, taking the money from the cash register and

putting it into the cloth sack we use, preparatory to locking it in the safe."

"And where were you?"

"I was tidying up the displays opposite. I had just started for the door, to lock it, when a man came inside. He was tall, on the thin side, rather shabbily dressed and in need of a shave. His hair was sandy-colored, and his nose appeared to have been broken at one time or another."

"What color were his eyes?"

"Brown, I think."

"That's a very accurate description."

"I have always been perceptive."

"Go on."

"The man brushed past me and went to the counter where my wife stood. She looked up, and very distinctly I heard the man tell her to be quiet, that he had a gun in his pocket, and to give him all the money."

"But she didn't comply."

"No," Mitchell said. "As well as being shrewish, Martha tended to be foolhardy during moments of crisis. She told the man to leave immediately, or she would begin screaming for help. The man repeated his order, but again Martha did not comply. The man appeared desperate. He pulled a gun from his pocket and pointed it at her. Martha opened her mouth to scream, and that was when he shot her. Then he turned and fled to the door."

"What were you doing while all this was going on?"

"I was by the door. I was frightened, unable to move. When the man ran by me, after he had shot Martha, he looked at me. His eyes were terrible. I thought for a fearful second he was about to shoot me too."

"Obviously he didn't," Schaeffer said blandly.

"Obviously," Mitchell answered, just as blandly. "He merely put the gun in his pocket again and ran outside."

"In what direction?"

"South, I believe. Toward the river."

"What happened then?"

"When I could move again, I ran to Martha's side. I saw instantly that she was dead. I had turned and started for the door to find help, when it burst open and Mr. Olivieri came running inside."

"Ah, yes," Schaeffer said. "Mr. Olivieri."

"He owns a liquor store on the next block, as you know," Mitchell went on quietly. "He said he had been on his way home when he heard what sounded like a gunshot. He hurried to investigate. I told him what had happened, and he dashed next door to the public telephone booth to call you, the police. We haven't a phone."

"While you waited with your wife's body?"

"Yes."

"How long was he gone to make the call?"

"Four or five minutes."

"Did anyone else come in during that period?"

"No. The streets are always nearly deserted at that time of night. No one else apparently had heard the shot."

Schaeffer nodded, as if to himself, and rolled his cigar around wetly in his mouth. I looked away; that particular mannerism of his had always repulsed me somehow.

He said, "Olivieri was approximately half a block away when he heard the gunshot."

"Yes, I believe that is what he said."

"To the north."

"Yes."

"When he heard the shot, he turned immediately and came running down here," Schaeffer said. "It would seem logical, then, that he would have seen this anonymous gunman of yours running from the store, wouldn't it?"

"I suppose it would."

"Olivieri didn't see anybody," Schaeffer said. "He didn't see anybody running out of this store, and he didn't see anybody trotting off toward the river."

"Perhaps, in the excitement, he missed the man."

"Olivieri says no."

"I can offer no other explanation."

"I can," Schaeffer told him. "There wasn't any gunman. You

shot your wife, Mitchell. You shot her and then you concocted this little fictional episode with the robber. There's even a chance you would have gotten away with it, too; that is, if it hadn't been for Olivieri showing up when he did."

Mitchell was silent.

"Really, Mitchell, why don't you make a clean breast of it? So you shot your wife. It happens every day. It might even be that you were justified to some degree. In any case, if you hire an intelligent lawyer, you can get off with a plea of second degree murder, or make a case out of temporary insanity. The worst you could get would be a couple of years in a minimum security prison, and then you'd be back home again."

Mitchell said nothing.

"The way you're playing it now makes you look guilty of Murder One," Schaeffer said. "And I really don't think it was premeditated. You'd have picked a better place to pull it off than here if you'd planned it beforehand. No, the way I see it, the two of you had a row. You lost your head, went for your gun, and shot her in a blind rage. Now isn't that the way it really happened, Mitchell?"

Mitchell didn't answer, but that was the way it had happened, all right. I could see it in his eyes, even though they were carefully veiled, and in a tiny muscle pulsating just under his right ear. Schaeffer, of course, saw it too. He smiled.

Mitchell seemed to be thinking, debating. When he made his decision, his thin jaw lifted in an attitude of defiance. All things considered, he had a lot of nerve; and he wasn't a bad liar. "I have already told you what happened, Lieutenant," he said. "Four times now, to be exact."

Schaeffer shrugged. Cat and mouse was a source of great pleasure for him, and he much preferred toying with a man like Mitchell—to obtaining a direct declaration of guilt. It was that damned superiority of his, as if he felt matters such as murder were simple little intellectual exercises for his own amusement. Like Perry Mason, he never lost, never erred, and that Great Man infallibility was what rankled me the most.

He took the cigar from his mouth and made a pretense of studying it. "It's really too bad, Mitchell, that you're not a more sensible man. It's going to go much harder on you this way. Especially since you damned well know that we've got you nailed right to the boards."

Mitchell displayed no emotion. "I am sure I don't know what you mean."

"Don't you, now?" Schaeffer asked in an amused tone. "Why, the gun, Mitchell. The gun you shot your wife with."

Mitchell touched his lips with the tip of his tongue.

"Likely," Schaeffer said, "you thought of disposing of it by way



of the sewer. But you didn't have time, and it's as simple as that. There's no rear entrance to this store, and you couldn't go out to the street with Olivier next door phoning. He was with you until we got here. You had four or five minutes to improvise a hiding place, and that's all. The gun is here in the shop someplace, Isn't that right, Mitchell?"

Mitchell met his eyes squarely, though it seemed to me to be an effort for him to do so. "I have nothing further to say."

Schaeffer smiled his egotistical smile. With an exaggerated sigh, he turned to me. "Well, Boone," he said, "it looks as if Mitchell here is forcing us to do things the diffi-

cult way. Why don't you go downtown and get a search warrant, hmm?"

"Yes, sir," I said, and I got on my feet.

"Oh, and Boone, bring two patrolmen back with you. Mitchell's hiding place might prove to be very clever, and we don't want to be here all night, do we?"

I glanced at Mitchell. He was sitting quietly, peering at the backs of his hands. I thought that he must be seething inside, even though he still appeared calm enough on the exterior. Between compressed lips I said again, "Yes, sir," and then I went out to the street to where our departmental sedan was parked.

It took me almost an hour and a half to obtain the warrant. I had to return to police headquarters, fill out the proper form, and then contact the magistrate on call to issue the document.

I explained in the form that a felony had been committed on the premises of Mitchell's hobby shop, and that through the testimony of Mitchell and the witness, Olivieri, we had reasonable grounds to believe that the weapon used in the crime was still on those premises.

I met the magistrate at the court house, and he gave me the signed warrant immediately. I returned to the hobby shop.

Schaeffer and Mitchell were still seated at the table. A fresh cigar, unlit, sat wetly in a corner of Schaeffer's bulbous mouth. Mitchell

was studying the backs of his thin white hands still; he appeared nervous now, apprehensive.

I handed the search warrant to Schaeffer. He was very calm, very patient. He glanced over it, and then slid it across to; Mitchell looked at it only briefly.

Schaeffer smiled, cold and dispassionate now. He said to the two patrolmen I had asked headquarters to dispatch, and who had been waiting when I arrived, "Okay, make a complete search. But carefully, lads; we wouldn't want to damage anything."

They began the search of the shop. I sat down, dividing my attention between them, and Schaeffer and Mitchell. Schaeffer was watching him intently, and Mitchell began to squirm under the steady, penetrating gaze.

Time passed. Finally, one of the patrolmen returned to the alcove.

"Well?" Schaeffer asked.

The patrolman made an apologetic gesture.

"Nothing," he said.

Schaeffer's eyes narrowed, and he chewed savagely at his cigar. "You went over everything thoroughly?"

"Yes, sir," the patrolman told him. "Under the counter, on the workbench, in the light fixtures, in the model boxes and displays. We even checked for loose floorboards. Nothing."

A slow flush began to creep along Schaeffer's neck. He's worried, I thought. Damned if he isn't wor-

ried. But it seemed he had a right to be. I leaned forward on my chair. Schaeffer said, "Listen, that gun is here somewhere; it has to be here. Go over the whole place again. You, too, Boone. Get going!"

The patrolmen and I made a second search of both the shop and the alcove; we did not overlook a single possibility that I could see.

We found nothing.

Schaeffer was livid. "Damn you, Mitchell!" he bellowed. "Where's that gun?"

Mitchell seemed to have regained his confidence. He smiled quietly.

"I suggest you admit your judgment was in error," he said, "and attempt to locate the gunman who shot my wife. You are simply wasting your time here, Lieutenant."

Schaeffer leaned toward him, and I thought for a moment he was going to lose control of himself. I poised on the balls of my feet. I knew what would happen if Schaeffer let his anger take precedence over his reason; I had seen it once before, at police headquarters. It had taken two men to pull Schaeffer off a suspect who had been goading him, and half the department to smooth the incident over so it didn't make the papers.

I didn't want the same thing occurring here; strong-arm methods are foolish and unnecessary. If it became unavoidable, I thought that I wouldn't mind taking a swing at him in the interest of both protocol and justice.

But Schaeffer's composure returned gradually. He took a deep breath and his eyes were mere slits when he said softly, "All right, Mitchell. You've won this round. But I'm not finished with you, not by a long shot. Mark my words; I'll pin this murder on you if it takes me the rest of my life, officially or unofficially. I'll see you in the jug for it, Mitchell. You damned well remember that."

The words seemed to have no effect on Mitchell; he sensed that his was the upper hand, now. "I do not intend to stand idly by while you continue to harass me. If you persist, I shall call your supervisor and report you. After all, I am a taxpayer and as such I have certain rights . . ."

With an effort—partly due to his grossness and partly due to his carefully-checked anger—Schaeffer struggled to his feet. He gave Mitchell a scathing look, his fingers clenching and unclenching at his sides. He seemed about to say something, thought the better of it, and stormed out through the store. The patrolmen and I followed.

Schaeffer turned there, staring past us at where Mitchell stood, now, by the alcove entranceway. Mitchell met his eyes. Finally, Schaeffer stepped through the door and moved in his rapid duck-waddle to where the departmental sedan waited at the curb. I was the last one out, and I closed the door behind me quietly.

I crossed to the sedan. Schaeffer was saying to one of the patrolmen, "The two of you park down the street. When Mitchell comes out of there, flag him down and quick-frisk him; that's within the law. That gun's still in there somewhere, and if he tries to bring it out, to dispose of it, I want him arrested on the spot."

"Yes, sir," one of the patrolmen said, and they moved to where their cruiser was parked.

Schaeffer said to me, "Let's go, Boone."

We got into the sedan, and I drove away from the curb. I made a couple of turns, heading back toward headquarters. Schaeffer set hunched forward on the passenger side, staring out through the windshield. He was brooding darkly. "He's guilty, Boone," he muttered. "He's guilty as hell."

I didn't answer. Something was nagging at the back of my mind, something I had seen and something I had heard. But I couldn't seem to grasp either one except in a fleeting, irritating way.

At headquarters, Schaeffer gave me my usual task of making out the report, then went into his small office and slammed the door. I knew what he would be thinking about in there, and I felt a little sorry for Mitchell. A little, but not much. He was guilty, all right, and I've never considered murder a pitying offense; especially when the

murderer wilfully attempts to deceive the police.

Nevertheless, I knew Schaeffer as well as any man could know him; it simply was not in him to admit failure, and he would go to any extreme to maintain infallibility.

I finished the report, in triplicate, and put it on the captain of detective's desk. When I came back to the squad room, the phone was ringing. I answered it, and it was Communications with a report from the patrolman Schaeffer had ordered to watch Mitchell.

Mitchell had left the hobby shop a short while ago, and they had quick-frisked him as per instructions. Mitchell was smart, all right; he had been clean. They had then followed him home, which was where he was at present. I told Communications to hold, and switched the call in to Schaeffer.

I was just about to begin sorting the papers in my basket, preparatory to typing up the backlogue, when one of the things which had been bothering me on the ride back to headquarters suddenly jumped from my sub-conscious to my conscious mind. I sat up very straight in my chair and let the wheels spin freely for several minutes.

At the end of that time, I knew where the gun was.

I felt a touch of excitement, and a half smile came onto my lips. I got on my feet. My first consideration, then, was to go into Schaeffer's office and tell him about it. I took a

step or two in that direction, but before I reached the door I stopped, considering.

I thought for a long moment, and then I went back to my desk and depressed the inter-com switch on the unit there. "Lieutenant?"

"What is it, Boone?" Schaeffer's voice snapped irritably.

"I'm going out for a few minutes, sir," I said carefully. "There's a lead I want to follow up on the Di Carpa robbery."

He muttered a disinterested acknowledgement. I used the telephone directory to look up Mitchell's home address, and then I put on my top-coat and rode the elevator down to the basement. I checked out the sedan again, and drove out to the modest development where Mitchell lived.

There were lights on in the front room; when I knocked on the door he answered it immediately. He was still dressed, and he held a drink in one hand. When he recognized me, the hint of a worried frown crossed his features. But they smoothed again quickly, and he said in a wry voice, "Detective Boone, isn't it? I suppose your lieutenant sent you out here to ask more foolish questions?"

I said shortly, "Get your coat on, Mitchell. We're going for a little ride."

Fright came into his eyes this time, and lingered. But then he drew himself up indignantly.

"If you are arresting me," he



said, "I assure you that I will sue. I will not tolerate—"

"I'm not arresting you," I told him. "Not yet, anyway. We're going back to that shop of yours. I want another look around inside."

He moistened his lips. He studied my face, and what he saw there put the fright back into his eyes to stay. "You—you can't do that. You have already—"

I took the search warrant from my pocket; I had retained it previously.

"This is still valid," I said. "Now let's go."

He took a deep breath. He was struggling with his fright now. After a moment, he became resolute, as if he'd decided that since we had not found the gun before, the odds were in his favor that I wouldn't find it now. I want in with him while he got his coat, and then led him out

to the sedan. We drove to where the hobby shop was located; Mitchell sat stiffly beside me, silent.

When he had unlocked the door, and we were inside, I had him put on some lights. Then I said, "Come over there by your workbench where I can see you, Mitchell."

I think he realized then that I knew where the gun was, that I had not brought him here simply to conduct another search. He appeared about to take flight, but the futility of such an effort was apparent to him; his knees seemed to sag, and his face was the color of milk. He leaned heavily against the counter.

I studied the cluttered workbench briefly, and then I stepped around the counter and peered up at the shelves there. After a moment, I reached up and took down the largest ship-in-a-bottle, a handsome and very authentic-looking clipper ship in what appeared to be a two-gallon decanter. I ran my fingers across the wide base of the bottle and held it up close to my eyes; yes, it was just as I had thought, all right.

I turned and put the bottle down on the workbench. I picked up a small glass cutter from the tool box lying there and cut a square in the center of the bottle large enough to get my hand through.

Seconds later, I lifted the gun from its hiding place inside the hollow frame of the clipper ship.

I looked up at Mitchell; all the bravado, the calculation had left him now. His eyes were tortured. I said

quietly. "It was an almost perfect hiding place, Mitchell. Who would think to look inside one of these bottles? The necks are too narrow to allow passage of a penknife, much less a .38 revolver. But I used to play with models like this when I was a kid, and I remembered asking my father once how they got the ship into the bottle."

"He told me that the genuine craftsman used to build it in there using special tools, but that the modern way was by cutting off the bottom of the bottle, placing an already constructed ship inside, and then replacing the bottom with glass glue and heating it so that you couldn't tell that it had ever been removed. This was how you built your models, Mitchell; hurriedly and inexpertly in this instance—you can see the marks of the cut on the bottle's base if you look carefully—but well enough to fool us when we searched the shop before."

Mitchell didn't answer. I went around the counter and took his arm and led him out to the sedan; he followed me like a child. I put him into the rear section and used my radio to call headquarters. I told Communications to get word up to Schaeffer to come out here, but I didn't tell them anything else. Then I sat back to wait.

I thought about Schaeffer, and what he would say when he arrived. I thought about what the department and the captain of detectives would say when they heard about it. I

thought about how the newspapers would play it up when I told them how Lieutenant Schaeffer, the Great Man, had blown one; had finally blown one.

There were at least two reporters I was acquainted with who were as disgusted as I was with Schaeffer's inflated, god-like ego. Well, they would deflate him, all right, properly and royally. They would make no small issue of the fact that it was because of *Schaeffer* that I remembered about the way they put ships

in bottles, and that I recalled in the squad room seeing an opened bottle of glass glue and a small heating torch on Mitchell's workbench; that it was Schaeffer himself who gave me the clue to the gun's hiding place when he said just before we left the hobby shop earlier:

"I'll see you in the *jug*, Mitchell."

Even though I knew that I would be making a very bad enemy for life in Schaeffer, somehow it didn't seem to matter. It didn't seem to matter at all.

MIKE SHAYNE LEADS NEXT MONTH'S HEADLINERS WITH—

KILLER OF THE 'GLADES

The man looked at me with hot eyes. "Find my little girl," he said. "And—find the man who took her. Bring him back to me, dead or alive. I don't care much which way!"

By BRETT HALLIDAY

When you read a Mike Shayne story, you've hit the peak in crime fiction enjoyment. Millions of readers will tell you. Don't miss this novel.



PICNIC AT MIDNIGHT

Greed . . . lust . . . trackless Murder, held strange carnival at midnight—with Death the only host . . .

by EDWARD D. HOCH

THEY CARRIED THE tablecloth out into the night and headed across the open field. "It's just like a picnic," Fecilla said.

"Exactly like a picnic," Gaines

agreed. "A picnic at midnight." He glanced at his watch. It was not yet eleven. They still had more than an hour to wait.

The night was clear and the sky

sparkled with stars. It was the sort of sky Gaines never saw in Manhattan, where the haze and the neon glow were enough to curtain out the universe.

"How far?" Fecilla asked.

He glanced back. They had come about two hundred yards from the rambling old farmhouse, through a little path of scrubby woods to the open field where they now stood.

"This should be far enough," he said, and they spread the white tablecloth over the dull brown earth.

"Full moon tonight," she observed. "Good visibility."

"That's the way we planned it."

They trudged back across the un-plowed field, and Gaines could feel the chickweed brushing against his ankles. The night was warm for September, especially this far north.

"Gaines?"

"What?"

"How did you ever get mixed up with Raditer?"

"He needed a bodyguard and I needed the money. It was easy."

"That's a hell of a body to have to guard." She lit a cigarette and tossed the dead match in a high arc through the weeds.

"You should know," Gaines observed, not unkindly.

Liking Fecilla Green was easy, even if she was his employer's mistress. She had deep brown eyes and a sad, pensive expression, but there were times when she came alive, all frills and fun, completely unaware

of her body or its demands. Those were times worth waiting for.

In truth, Gaines had drifted into Raditer's circle in a most haphazard way, inheriting the job of bodyguard from a friend who'd been busted by the police on a narcotics charge. Gaines himself was a natural from Raditer's viewpoint—he had no record, he made a good appearance, and he was fast with his fists.

The three of them—Raditer and Fecilla and Gaines—had driven up from New York that morning. It was an all-day trip to Mother Fry's farm near the Canadian border, but they'd made it by dinner time. Mother Fry had met them at the door, all in black, welcoming them like some rural witch.

And in truth she was a witch of sorts, even if she was surely nobody's mother. Her name was Stella Fry, and she'd been a chorus girl on Broadway in her younger days. That was where Raditer had met her. She'd managed to hit the alimony game big once or twice, and so she'd bought this little farm up near the Canadian border and settled down to a rural retirement.

Raditer liked to drive up and see her every few months, even if he didn't have any business like tonight. As Mother Fry she pursued her hobby of fortune telling and spiritualism, and she even went so far as to give Raditer readings from a genuine crystal ball.

She was a woman in her fifties now, with a firm and commanding

ace. Her features were still good, her body more youthful than her years, and her hands firm from toil. She was, Raditer swore, the best cook north of Central Park.

So they'd dined there that night, and after dinner Gaines had sat in the front window watching for Mittle's car. When it came, he recognized it at once by the whip antenna or the short-wave radio. He checked the pistol beneath his left armpit and walked out to meet the man. This was the sort of thing he was paid to do, and he did it well.

"You're George Mittle?" he asked.

The man nodded. He was big and bulky, like an ex-boxer gone to fat, and maybe that's what he was. He looked mean, but then so did Gaines on occasion. "That's right. Are you Raditer?"

"Just a friend. He's inside."

"A friend!" Mittle snorted and went inside.

The preliminaries went well, and he gave barely a glance at Mother Fry. His eyes seemed to rest on Fecilla's crossed knees as she sat in a big overstuffed chair, but he made no comment on her presence. He seemed to accept it all as a part of the business.

Sam Raditer was an enigma to anyone meeting him for the first time. He always dressed warmer than the weather called for, and his face was a constant mask of his emotions. Partly this was due to the dark glasses he always wore. He'd told

Gaines once that he had klieg eyes as a result of an early and abortive movie career in his youth.

It was a type of inflammation and edema of the eyes caused by prolonged exposure to arc lights, and apparently was not uncommon in the movie industry. Gaines doubted if the condition would have lasted half a lifetime, but Raditer paid his salary and he didn't question it out loud.

Mittle had come for the diamonds, of course, and he examined each one carefully on the kitchen table while the others watched. He was a meticulous workman, and each of the gems in the little chamois bag was subjected to a series of tests before it was passed.

"All right," he said finally. "There it is. One million, more or less."

"As I told you," Raditer said. He was growing visibly impatient. "Now send your signal and let's get on with it."

Mittle nodded and went out to his car, leaving the diamonds where they were. When he came back in after a few minutes, he said, "I sent the code word. The plane should be on its way soon."

"How long?" Raditer wanted to know. "It's a long ride back."

The bulky man shrugged. "An hour or so. It's just a little single-engine job."

"That would make it nearly midnight."

Mittle nodded. "Just about. Here's something you can do, though. Send

your friend here out in the field to spread out a white tablecloth."

"Will the pilot see it at night?"

"Sure, with that moon."

And so the preparations were made. A million dollars in diamonds was being given as the down payment for two million dollars in heroin, which would fall from the sky like some Biblical manna at midnight. Gaines and Fecilla went out to spread their tablecloth and receive the offering.

FECILLA GREEN said again, "I mean it, how did you get mixed up with him? You're no two-bit thug, Gaines. You don't fit as the bodyguard to a New York heroin king."

He smiled down at her. "Maybe I'm an undercover narcotics agent."

"Maybe you are."

That annoyed him. "Well, I'm not, so forget it. I'm just a guy and this is just a job."

"Keeping Raditer alive?"

"Yeah."

"Mittle could have killed him and stolen the diamonds while we were out here."

"Not likely," Gaines told her. "Raditer is careful. He wouldn't turn his back on his best friend if I weren't there."

"He trusts you a lot, I know that."

They'd almost reached the farmhouse, and they could hear the soft music from Mother Fry's radio, drifting out over the empty fields. It was two miles to the nearest house.

"Did you do it?" Raditer asked

"It's all spread, waiting for the plane."

He nodded and glanced at his watch. "Still almost an hour till midnight. Time for a look into Mother Fry's crystal ball."

"You really go for that stuff, don't you?" Fecilla said.

Raditer patted down his thinning hair in a typical nervous gesture. "It passes the time, dear girl."

He took off his dark glasses to clean them, giving Gaines a rare view of his tiny, deep-set eyes. He often wondered if his employer shot heroin himself, even though he knew the big men in the business traditionally stayed away from it.

"Come on, then," Mother Fry said. "If you want a reading we got to do it before midnight."

"Cards tonight?" Gaines asked. He liked to kid her, although she rarely saw the humor in his remarks.

"No cards, just the crystal. The crystal will show us the future."

Mittle had gotten a beer from somewhere, and he joined them now, drinking it.

"Better give me the diamonds," he suggested. "The plane will be here soon."

"Not for an hour," Raditer responded. "You get the diamonds when that package of H lands on the tablecloth, not before."

Mother Fry held her readings and lookings and communings with the spirit world in a dim front parlor of the farmhouse, an almost barren

little room lit only by four fat candles in glass holders, that looked a bit like oversized vigil lights from some secret church.

The candles had been lit for a time already, and the wicks seemed to float in the melted wax pools, sending dancing shadows along the dim walls of the room. The candles were lined on a long low table against one wall. Opposite them were the drape-covered windows, and on the wall opposite the single door was a faded tapestry depicting some sort of hunting scene—men on horseback in a dark woods.

But the center of the room's congealed atmosphere was surely the little round table with its crystal ball mounted on a black onyx base. There were only two chairs, one on either side of this table, for Mother Fry and her client of the moment. Gaines often wondered if she did much of a business among the local farmers, or if this setup was strictly for people like Raditer who came from the city on their borderline missions.

"Now you just sit down," she told Raditer, directing him to the chair nearest the door. "We'll be ready to start in a moment."

Gaines and Fecilla and Mittle crowded into the doorway, watching Raditer take his place with his back to them. Somehow the whole thing seemed unreal to Gaines, like this house and the night outside.

"The diamonds," Mother Fry told Raditer. "Scatter the diamonds



on the table here, where they can be seen in the crystal." She flipped a switch beneath the little table and a light in the onyx base came on, filling the crystal ball with a sort of shimmering brightness.

Raditer reluctantly poured the score of small, flawless gems from their bag, spreading them with his fingers around the base of the crystal.

"Be careful with those, Mittle said from the doorway. "They're mine now.'

"Not yet," Raditer replied, fingering his dark glasses. "Not yet."

Gaines watched the shimmer of light inside the crystal ball, seeking perhaps the vision that Mother Fry seemed to find there. The candle light caught at the faceted diamonds, then leaped to the smooth crystal, weaving itself into a sort of play of brightness and shadow.

Mother Fry passed a hand over the ball and pushed back the long, full sleeves of her robe. She might just then have been an ancient oracle, conjuring up the luck of a Caesar or a Napoleon. And in truth was not Raditer something of a Caesar or a Napoleon? Was he not a leader and molder of men as he dispensed his drugs and took control of their minds and bodies, their futures and their pasts?

He dealt in dreams, there in Needle Park and East Harlem and the Village. And he came here to Mother Fry to have his own dreams replenished. This was his narcotic, his heroin.

"The vibrations are not good," Mother Fry rasped. "You all must leave us alone. Close the door and leave us alone!"

They did as they were told, and Mittle returned to the kitchen with his beer.

"Only forty-five minutes till the plane makes its drop," he told them.

Gaines nodded and said nothing. Fecilla went upstairs to the bathroom and he walked out on the rickety front porch alone to look up

at the stars. The night was silent, with only the dull throbs of Mother Fry's radio coming all but unheard from the kitchen. Mittle must have turned it down, Gaines supposed. Maybe he didn't like loud music while he drank his beer and waited for his diamonds.

There was no sound of a plane yet, but Gaines knew it would be coming soon, crossing the border by night to aim its cargo at a tiny square of tablecloth in the middle of an unplowed field. He thought about it, and the drive back to New York, and decided that he would soon be quitting the employ of Sam Raditer. There were some things one didn't do, not even for money.

Then he heard the scream, loud and close and abrupt. He turned and ran back into the house, reaching the closed door of the parlor almost at once. Mittle was coming from the kitchen, and Fecilla was on the stairs. Gaines slammed open the door and flicked on the light switch.

Mother Fry was still seated at her glowing crystal ball, as if in a trance. And Sam Raditer was crumpled onto the floor by his chair, a kitchen knife plunged deep between his shoulder blades.

Gaines tore his eyes from the body to scan the table top, but already he knew what he would see. There was only the little chamois bag, empty and alone. The diamonds were gone.

George Mittle pulled back his lips in a sort of snarl and took a small,

flat automatic from his pocket. "What is this? What are you pulling around here?"

Gaines was on his knees by the body, but it was too late to do anything for Raditer. Too late, ever again. Such a simple job, to guard a man's body from violent death. Such a simple job, and he'd been unable to do it.

"Put that gun away, you fool," he told Mittle. "Somebody killed him and took the diamonds. We're not pulling anything."

Now the bulky man turned his attention to the woman in the chair.

"What happened?" he demanded. "Why'd you kill him?"

At last she seemed to regain her senses. She shook her head several times and mumbled, "I didn't kill him. Someone came in. Someone opened the door behind him."

Mittle eyed the other two. "Which one of us? Which one of them?"

"I don't know, I didn't see. When the crystal is glowing, I go into a sort of trance." She rose unsteadily from her chair, keeping her eyes from the thing on the floor.

"Can't you see she's lying?" Fecilla told them. "All three of us were in this hall within seconds after the scream. There was no one at that door!"

Gaines had to agree with her. And yet—"It might not have been Raditer who screamed. It might have been her."

"It sounded like a man."

Gaines sighed and faced Mother

Fry. "If she did it, the diamonds are still in this room. Let's start searching."

"You search," Mittle told them from the doorway. "I'm keeping this gun on all of you."

Mother Fry bent to blow out the candles. "You can't really think that I would kill him."

"It's the knife from your kitchen," Gaines pointed out. "And as near as we can tell, you were alone with him." He glanced over at Fecilla. "Take her in the next room and search her. Right down to the skin. Don't miss a thing."

Then Gaines set to work in the little room, under the watchful eye of Mittle and his gun. He went over the drapes and the tapestry, examined the windows and found them tightly locked. A thin film of dust showed they hadn't been opened recently—and besides, they only opened onto the porch where he had been standing.

He went back to the table along the wall, lifting each candle in its glass container, getting down on his knees to feel along the underside of the table itself for any tape or chewing gum. There was nothing.

He picked up the crystal ball and examined the onyx base with its light bulb. He went over this table too, and both chairs. Then he took a deep breath and began searching Raditer's body. Pockets, skin, even inside his mouth and nostrils and ears. There was nothing. Finally he

got to his feet and showed Mittle his empty hands.

"Then Mother Fry must have them," the bulky man said. "The old witch was trying to cut me out."

But Fecilla Green returned just then with the robed woman. "I went over everything," she told them. "No diamonds."

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure."

George Mittle tightened his grip on the gun. "That plane's due here in twenty minutes. And that's just how long you've got to produce those diamonds. Otherwise I start shooting."

"All right," Gaines said. "Now we search each other."

"You heard me. One of us might have the diamonds. Or Mother Fry might even have slipped them in our pockets."

They did it, quickly and carefully. Gaines let the gunman search him and be searched in turn, always keeping the pistol in the air.

"Pull something and I shoot the girl," Mittle warned.

"Don't worry."

Fecilla stepped forward. "What about me?"

Gaines looked around. "Maybe Mother Fry can search you."

"You can do it. I'm no stranger to men's hands."

Gaines nodded and went quickly over her body, spending some time in her upswept blonde hair. But there were no diamonds.

Mittle glanced at his watch. "Just ten minutes."

"We've looked everywhere," Gaines pleaded. Then a thought struck him. "Except in the magazine of your automatic. Suppose it contained diamonds instead of bullets."

"All right, wise guy! Toss your pistol over here and you can have mine to search."

Gaines did it and went over both guns in turn. There was nothing.

"I'll have mine back again," he said.

But Mittle shook his head. "I'm keeping both of them for now."

"They must be somewhere else in the house," Fecilla said. "And it'll take us all night to search the whole place."

"Look," Gaines pointed out, feeling a little like a teacher, "there's no hole in the floor, not even a heat register. I've checked the light fixtures and looked under the rug. The windows haven't been opened. Those diamonds aren't in this room, and yet they couldn't have left it, either. Twenty or so diamonds aren't easy to hide, you know. Not as easy as you'd think."

Mother Fry moved into the center of the room. "I believe they were spirited away. Literally taken by the spirits."

"Nuts!" Mittle said. "You've got five minutes to cough them up before I start shooting."

"Cough them—" Gaines was staring at Mother Fry. "Could she have swallowed them?" he asked.

Then, "Fecilla, quick! Find something in the kitchen. Powdered mustard in warm water should do it!"

They forced it down the woman's gasping throat, and the results were immediate. But there were no diamonds.

As Mother Fry collapsed sobbing on the couch in her living room, Mittle cocked an ear toward the sky. "It's midnight. Outside, both of you!" He had both guns in his hands now, and he followed them out, down the steps, across the field.

It was almost time for the picnic.

WALKING OVER THE unplowed ground at Gaines' side, Fecilla asked, "Do you think Mother Fry killed him?"

"I don't know," he answered. "I can't imagine him letting her get behind him to use that knife. And even if she did somehow, what did she do with the diamonds? She had maybe ten seconds before we were in that room."

"Gaines, there's something I didn't tell you," she whispered, half turning her head to where Mittle followed in the darkness.

"What?"

"I found one of the diamonds."

"Where?"

"It was on the floor, almost under the body. I saw it when we first rushed into the room, and I stepped on it, hard. I imbedded it in the rubber sole of my shoe, and left it there till after you searched me. Here—"



"Keep it," he said. "One diamond doesn't help us now. It only deepens the mystery of what happened to the others."

There was a distant drone in the northern sky, far off but growing louder. Gaines glanced at his glowing wrist watch. It was six minutes after midnight.

"That'll be him," Mittle said, "No funny stuff, now."

The three of them had reached the white tablecloth, and Mittle

moved around to the opposite side, keeping his guns on them.

"He's going to kill us, isn't he?" the girl asked.

"Probably. But he's still hoping for those diamonds. They're more valuable to him at this point than the heroin. He obviously has no outlet for the narcotics or he wouldn't have been dealing with Raditer in the first place."

The sound of the approaching plane was growing louder.

"Gaines?" Fecilla said.

"What now?"

"When I saw him dead—Raditer—I didn't feel a thing. There was the knife and all that blood, and he might have been a perfect stranger."

"Maybe he was a stranger—to both of us."

"But I—"

"Don't think about it. Not now."

Then they could see the wing lights of the little plane, see it coming in low over the tree tops. The pilot missed the tablecloth on the first pass, but then he must have spotted it. He turned and circled and came in still lower. He knew what he was doing.

"Here it comes," Mittle said.

The bundle, surprisingly small, came tumbling out of the sky, landing within five feet of the tablecloth.

Mittle bent to pick it up and Gaines shot him once through the head.

Fecilla sobbed and started to collapse against Gaines. He walked over and stood for a moment, looking

down at Mittle's body, then bent and retrieved his gun.

"You had another gun," she sobbed.

"It was Raditer's. I took it off his body when I searched him, and then hid it in the living room sofa while Mittle was searching me."

"You could have done the same thing with the diamonds."

"Except that I didn't."

"You killed Mittle to keep him from getting them."

He looked down at the body, sprawled half across the tablecloth in the moonlight. The picnic was over for Mittle. "I was trying for his shoulder, but he bent over a bit faster than I expected."

"Am I supposed to believe that?"

"He was going to kill us anyway. Believe what you want to. Come on."

"Where?"

"Back to the house."

"What about the heroin?"

"Leave it."

"But—"

"Leave it."

They went back once more across the field, empty-handed, back to Mother Fry's rambling old farmhouse. She was waiting for them in the doorway.

"I heard a shot," she said.

"Yes."

"It was that awful Mittle. If he's dead, I'm glad."

"He's dead."

"Did you get it? The heroin? I heard the plane."

"It's back there in your field, with the body. And the tablecloth."

"What now?" she asked.

Gaines pushed past her into the farmhouse. "We reconstruct the crime, just like in the movies."

They followed her into the little front room, stepping over Raditer's body, where it still sprawled next to the table.

"Why do you want to do this?" Mother Fry asked. "What difference does it make now?"

"I was hired as his bodyguard, and I let him get killed. I guess I owe him something before I head back to the city. Come on. Light the candles."

She did as he said and then took her seat behind the crystal ball.

"This is like it was," she said.

"Except for the diamonds on the table between you. Give me that one, Fecilla."

She handed it over. He tossed it casually onto the table where it rolled and glistened in the candlelight. "One that got away, Mother Fry. A small one, not as big as the others, but still with a certain value."

Her gray eyes settled on it. "Yes. Now what?"

"Do just what you did before."

"I—I read my crystal."

"Did you see death in it, Mother Fry? Death for Sam Raditer?"

"No."

"The crystal must have been clouded."

She lifted her head to gaze into

his hard blue eyes. "Do you think I killed him?"

"I know you did, Mother Fry. It could only have been you. There were four of us in the house. I didn't kill him, Fecilla could more easily have stolen the diamonds from him back in New York, and Mittle would have no motive for stealing what would be his anyway. That only left you. And when Fecilla told me she'd found this diamond on the floor, I even knew how you'd done it."

"Raditer was careful about turning his back on people, but you tricked him. While passing your hands over the crystal ball, you managed to flick one of the diamonds onto the floor. Naturally Raditer bent over to find it, and that's when you slipped the butcher knife from your wide sleeve and killed him."

"You think I'd do that?"

"I know you would. A lot of people would, for a million in diamonds. Your hands are strong and firm. They could do the job. But in your panic at his scream, you forgot the diamond on the floor."

"The others," Fecilla said. "What did she do with the rest of the diamonds? We searched everywhere."

"Everywhere but the right place." Gaines stood and walked over to the side table, and picked up one of the candles. He tipped it upside down and the pool of melted wax splashed onto the table. Along with five diamonds.

"In the *candles*?"

Gaines nodded. "The only place we didn't think of. These glass holders keep the wax from running out, and it collects inside, beneath the flaming wick. Everyone's seen it happen. I noticed it earlier in the evening. It must be an inch deep in each candle. She simply scooped up the diamonds, dropped four or five into each candle, and watched them sink into the molten wax. Later, when she blew them out, the wax solidified almost instantly. When I examined the candles later, the diamonds were safely hidden a half-inch or so deep in the opaque wax at the top."

Mother Fry was smiling at them when she suddenly lurched to the table and grabbed up another of the fat glowing candles and hurled it at Gaines' head. It missed but hit the tapestry on the wall behind him. In an instant the room was alive with flames.

Gaines managed to get Fecilla

out of the house, but there was no hope for Mother Fry. She stayed in there, somewhere, with the diamonds and Raditer's body, and when the walls collapsed they heard her scream. From somewhere far away, the town fire alarm began to sound over the hills and fields.

"We have to get out of here," Gaines said.

"What about the diamonds?"

"The diamonds are in there. And the heroin is back in the field, where it'll stay. Let the firemen find it and do what they want with it."

But she was struggling in his grip. "That's two million dollars, Gaines! My God!"

"Two million dollars and three dead people. Come on."

Fecilla broke away and started running, back across the fields in the moonlight. He watched her for a time, hoping she would turn, but she kept on going.

After a time Gaines got in the car and drove away.

Next Month

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by EDWARD D. HOCH

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October—1969

A Terrifying Story of Today



DEATH WEARS A WHITE HAT

by M. G. OGAN

*They were all there — the hippies, the jills,
the stone-faced torpedo boys with the guns.
They were there for only one reason. I was
scheduled to die before tomorrow's dawn!*



MARION, GEORGIA, is my home town. I read about it in the Montreal papers, when police guarded the home of Mayor Gillis on Hillside Road after he'd publicly spoken out about the Vigilantes of America, a new ultra-right and militant group whose patron saint is Rodger T. Alderson, the eccentric son of a publisher father who made millions.

The V. O. A. local hotheads had

fire-bombed a few country churches, and burned out some tenant farmers, so Mayor Gillis lost his cool.

"This kind of scum has got to go," he declared on local TV, and the national networks picked him up. "Let them pick on someone who can fight back."

So they took his challenge. Steve Marlin, a two-time loser for armed robbery, was delegated to fire-bomb the Gillis home, one of the

few ante-bellum mansions left in Georgia since General Sherman took his famous shortcut to the sea.

Steve Marlin took his girl along to see the fun — it isn't every day you can watch a mayor and his family burned up for The Cause.

Marion officers in T-shirts dyed black and dark slacks held all the high ground, armed with riot guns in addition to their regular .44 Magnums. A bull-horn command to cease and desist gave Steve Marlin the idea this was a fine time to see what his souped-up car, designed to run moonshine down from the hills, could do against local and state police cruisers with their 460-cube Interceptor engines.

It was no race. After a riot gun blast that must have killed his girl Annabelle outright, Marlin made it through Marion with no pursuit, because the state troopers had road-blocked all highways leading out of Marion.

It was opposite the Travel Motel that Marlin met his Waterloo. He stitched two highway patrolmen through the gut with his sub machine gun; they were on the critical list, but made it back to duty in time.

Sixteen .44 slugs were dug out of Marlin's skinny corpse at the local morgue; seven charges of buckshot, and one .32 bullet lodged in his left ankle. They never did find out who used that caliber weapon.

Annabelle was laid out in profile

— the right side of her face was a mess! The officer who pulled the riot gun trigger that erased Annabelle felt bad. But she wore her hair short, and who can tell a girl from a guy in the dark these days?

Canadians spread it thick when their Yankee cousins stage a shooting spectacular. I suppose it does something for their ego. They have their shoot-outs, of course, but that's inside page news.

The spectacular wouldn't have been complete without an "innocent bystander" being sent to meet his maker, so a guitar strummer for a group known as The White Hats stepped out of his motel room to see what all the shooting was about. A slug from Steve Marlin's weapon drilled him between the eyes.

I play guitar, so there was empathy there. Yet I had more respect for the girl vocalist and the other four members of the group. They hit the deck, inside their motel rooms, and crawled under their beds. That indicated to me that our younger generation still has a modicum of common sense.

I wound up my business in Montreal the next evening in the back booth of a shabby bar. An accountant for one of our clients, Whitby & Whitby, had border-hopped with a half million in negotiable securities, but he was too dumb to make fencing arrangements before he left home, so I was glad to oblige. He got a stack of newsprint dyed

money-green with a C-note on top. I got the bundle of valuable paper.

I was stateside before he knew the difference, delivered the bundle to Whitby & Whitby in Chicago, and took a plane for St. Louis.

I'm an agent for Lundon Security Service, although I worked my way through Ohio U. and played seven years as a pro-football quarterback to get my law degree so I could qualify for the F.B.I.

Jasper Lundon had scouted me. Lundon Security was established in 1860 in St. Louis to infiltrate the Kansas Jayhawker movement. There's a five-story steel and concrete building at that address now, with Jasper Lundon's penthouse on the roof—nerve center for an international organization specializing in investigations too complex, or too dangerous, for the other private investigators.

Jasper is a devious and tough-minded old man who always gets who or what he wants. He baited me with money and challenged me to work for him and live long enough to collect retirement pay at forty-five. I like money and never could resist a dare.

When I arrived at my private office there was a sheet of paper on my desk simply inscribed: *See me.* I took the penthouse elevator. When I'd passed inspection by James, his English butler, I was admitted to the premises.

"The master is at breakfast," James announced.



Tall; gray at the temples, with a perfectly expressionless face James is the Hollywood concept of the perfect British butler. The butler bit was one of his best put-ons, as a matter of fact, when James was on the con, before Jasper, personally, put him away for a short stretch.

Jasper eats breakfast in what he calls his sun room. It's windowed on three sides with a skylight, which accounts for Jasper's tanned, healthy look. He hasn't left the 106 Mercier Street building during the past ten years that anyone knows about. He's a bachelor with a detective agency for his mistress.

Jasper had company for breakfast. The handsome thirty-year-old man who could play juvenile leads was on his right hand. This was Stacy Latimore, pianist and arranger for The White Hats. Also their business manager and founder of the group.

Stacy Latimore was lean with a glistening professional smile, but a face with rugged contours that indicated character and a man with convictions.

Cherry Whitten sat at Jasper's left. She was a small-boned girl with tawny hair, wide eyes, and a shy smile, but sadness was printed on her face.

"What took you so long up there in Toronto?" Jasper growled at me, without looking up from his plate.

"I was in Montreal, and you damned well know it," I told him. "Half a million is worth three days of work."

"This is Blake Nethery," he told Stacy and Cherry. "Six-two, two hundred pounds, a bachelor, but not very eligible. There's nothing wrong with his I.Q., but his F.Q. is moronic. Sit down, Blake. Have a cup of coffee. You ate breakfast on the plane."

"What's F.Q.?" Cherry asked.

"It's new to me," Stacy admitted.

Jasper chuckled. "Fear Quotient. Blake lacks that human emotion. It's going to get him killed one day."

"You're being put on by this old pirate," I told the two of them.

"There are times when my own shadow scares the hell out of me."

James brought my coffee. "I'll have some bacon and eggs, too," I told him, "with buttered toast."

"Freeloader!" Jasper muttered.

"You're a skinflint and a rotten host," I shot back at him. "Now we've had the amenities, what's up that concerns me?"

Stacy laid it out. "On the road, eating around, you hear all kinds of chatter. We tipped the Marion law about the plot to bomb-out their mayor. Guy, our guitar player, probably got it by mistake, but the V. O. A. has plans for the rest of us. Like extermination."

"Guy and I were engaged," Cherry volunteered. "He was afraid for me when the shooting started."

"You're joining The White Hats as their new guitarist," Jasper told me. "Dody Russell is coming on from our Boston agency to work with you."

"Wait a minute! What about the union? Anyway, I'm a guitar plunker, and not a pro. Stacy, tell him the difference."

"I'm making new arrangements of our standards," Stacy said. "We're cutting the guitar parts way back. All you have to do is grin and go through the motions. Maybe tap your foot once in a while."

"Who's Dody Russell?" I asked Jasper.

"Don't you read the Sports? She's our last high board Olympic diving champion. After that, she

trained as a policewoman for the Boston P.D. I recruited her, like I got you. You two should make a fine team."

"She also sings," Cherry said. "She's cut a couple of sides under the Argus label that aren't half bad. She and I will share vocalist honors and duet a few numbers."

"So you see?" Jasper said. "It's a very simple thing. You and Dody just have to keep The White Hats alive for the rest of their tour. It's almost a paid vacation."

"How long does this tour last?" I asked Stacy.

"A month."

"J. C. Howard up in Nashville is our agent," Cherry told me. "He sent us to Mr. Lundon for protection."

"J. C. is a very good friend of mine," Jasper said.

So there it was.

I MET DODY Russell at the airport that evening. The name fooled me. I was expecting someone small and cute. Dody was tall and lithe with an athlete's stride. Classic features, only slightly marred by a too generous mouth — the girl was Back Bay Boston impersonified. She wasn't about to be impressed by St. Louis or me.

We took a cab for the Mark Twain Motel, where The White Hats were staying for their three-nighter booking in St. Louis before we left for Joplin.

Chin on her hand, elbow on the

window sill, Dody stared out at the passing panorama of St. Louis while I tried to brief her.

"You'll bunk in with the other vocalist, Cherry," I said.

"I know." Was she trying to repress a yawn?

"We're both paid up with the musicians' union and working under special permits."

"I've assumed we were."

"This V. O. A. bunch are to be reckoned with. I don't think they're kidding. This could get to be a very sticky assignment."

"I'm sure it may." What was so fascinating about those old brownstones?

There was a small mole just below the hairline on the nape of her neck.

"Cherry will be your special responsibility."

"Of course."

"Courtman Breslau plays a hot trumpet. Delbert Jackson plays the drums, Lamarr Riser plays sax and doubles in brass on the cornet. Stacy Latimore plays the piano, belts a few verses, and leads the group."

"I saw them perform at the Cape Cod music festival last summer."

"Then you know their Thing. Moderate haircuts, no beards, clean living, no smutty lyrics, one religious number each performance; all the fellows are vets with combat time. Good sound musicianship."

Dody finally did yawn, patting

her petulant mouth with a gray-gloved hand.

I'd finally had it. "Do you mind if I speak very frankly?"

"Why, no, of course not." She finally turned her head to look at me. Her eyes were hazel with interesting golden flecks. "Please do, Mr. Nethery."

"You give me a pain, too, but it isn't in the neck. I'm looking forward to working with you just as much as I would be if you were a Persian cat with a mean disposition. We do, however, have a job to do together."

Dody's silent laughter, reflected in her eyes, goaded me.

"So forget I've said it," I told her, "and go back up into your ivory tower, but first tell me what you carry in that handbag besides junk. I'm agent in charge here so I want to know."

Dody silently produced a Browning .25 semi-automatic that fitted exactly the palm of her small hand. She then showed me a lipstick.

"Mace in it," she told me. There was tear gas in the ball point pen. What looked like a fingernail file was a switch blade knife.

"In case my purse is snatched—" The light karate chop to the side of my neck put a kink in it. "I'm also familiar with Judo. What else do you want to know, Mr. Nethery?"

"What's that perfume?"

She smiled. "It isn't lethal, but it is expensive."

I couldn't help grinning.

Dody laughed. "Big, masterful men scare the bejesus out of me," she admitted, "until I find out whether they've been house-broken."

"Lady, with your weaponry, we've got only a business partnership, and you can believe it!"

"I'm rather certain I'd be safe with you unarmed," she said, seriously.

Dody and Cherry had voices that blended well; Dody performed first time out as if she'd been a professional all her life. I was ten thumbs with the guitar, but the others covered me with their musicianship. Our first performance went as well as could be expected.

It was what happened after the performance that raised the hair on the back of my neck. The usual mob of kids were haunting the stage door when we made our dash for the two station wagons that were transportation for The White Hats. The fellows, tired as they were, flashed gracious smiles, and autographed whatever was pushed at them.

Cherry and Dody were behind me, to my left. I heard a yelp of fear, swung around, and some jerk had grabbed the neck of Cherry's dress. A quick jerk, and she was stripped to bra and panties.

Dody snatched for the torn dress. A gaunt faced older man, with jug ears, had it, and was trying to elbow out of the crowd of kids. A



blonde boy swung at him and clipped Dody instead. She dropped under stamping feet as the crowd turned into a scared mob.

Stacy and I went in after Dody and got her to her feet. The others bundled Cherry in a coat and rushed her to the lead station wagon. We got out of there, fast.

"It was never like that before," Stacy told me, during the ride back to the motel. "Crazy kids, yes. Once Court lost a necktie; another time Del lost a shoe in the shuffle. A girl's elbow gave Lamarr a black eye one date we played. But dress snatching?"

Cherry was quietly sobbing with Dody's arm around her coated shoulders.

"I've heard of guys stealing women's clothes off clothes lines," Del said. "We had one in our

neighborhood when we lived in Baltimore."

"I'm no clothes line!" Cherry snapped.

Pro drivers for The White Hats were Mac Pearson and Joe Antonelli, expert chauffeurs with clean records; not a traffic violation between the two of them, even. I told them to garage the station wagons instead of leaving them in the motel parking lot.

Cherry and Dody were joking about the dress episode when I knocked on the door of their motel room. Dody let me in. Cherry was already tucked in one of the single beds, wearing a curler cap.

"You should have gone for the guy, instead of the dress," I told Dody. "If we could have booked him we might have found out something."

"You don't know much about mob psych, do you?" she said, coldly. "If I'd tried to take dress-snatcher those kids would have turned on all of us. He was an old bum to you and me, doing a put-up job, but one chop at his windpipe by me and he would have become a father image."

Hell, she was probably right. "Good night, Cherry. Good night, Dody. Sweet dreams."

THE NEXT DAY at breakfast I told The White Hats and Dody, "We've got to miss these mob scenes. We do it by a simple ruse. The station wagons park by the

stage door. We leave by another door and make it to the motel in cabs."

Stacy frowned. "That won't help our image much."

"What good is your image," Dody said, "if it's on a morgue slab? Blake is right."

"That was one of my favorite dresses," Cherry said. "I'm for the cab deal. Next time I might lose more than just a dress."

Stacy shrugged. "We do it Blake's way from here on in," he said. "That's why Howard is paying the man."

We got out of St. Louis without any further trouble. Howard had us booked for a one-night stand in Springfield on our way to Joplin. To make the date we had to leave St. Louis in the station wagons right after our last time on stage.

You deal with a professional criminal on the basis of his Modus Operandi, or M.O. The pros lack imagination and ingenuity except in a few exceptional cases. They reason what works today is bound to work tomorrow, and never seem to learn that it doesn't.

Dealing with fanatics, however, is another ball game. They're not predictable. You study assassins and assassination methods at the F.B.I. Academy. In Old Russia it was the bearded ones with their black powder bombs. Today it's the high-powered rifle with telescopic sights, or the \$15.00 .22 caliber pistol that can be bought, second-

hand, for half the price. Or borrowed for the occasion, for that matter. There's always some fool around who'll lend his gun.

Instead of black powder the modern assassin has both dynamite and T.N.T. at his disposal; plastic explosives, and devices that will blow a car driver to Kingdom Come when he steps on the starter. And then there's the "arranged accident"—a fall from a high window, a hit-and-run set-up, the "gun accident," carbon monoxide asphyxiation, or a tumble headlong down a long flight of stairs.

It's a long pull from St. Louis to Springfield and we had a foggy night with patches of rain. The kids were exhausted and sprawled around asleep in both wagons.

Dody and I were as exhausted as the kids, but being paid to do a job helps keep you awake and alert. I rode "shotgun" in the lead wagon with Mac behind the wheel—Dody was awake and watchful on the front seat of the second wagon, Joe driving. She and I had a signal system worked out. Three horn toots meant she thought we were being followed. If I saw trouble ahead, Mac would blast on the horn. Dody had instructions then to stop Joe rolling, to wait and see.

Coming into Lebanon, a half-ton pickup came out of a side road. He was cutting it close to cross the main highway ahead of the lead wagon, and Mac toed brakes. The half-ton stopped, blocking us.

Mac blasted the horn before I could tell him to. Three bleats from behind told me we were in a box. Two men were out of the pickup, using it for a shield while they leveled shotguns over the bed.

"Down!" I ordered Mac.

I didn't have to say it twice.

The kids stirred behind me in the wagon. "Stay down!" I yelled at them, knocked the door latch with my elbow and rolled out on the shoulder of the road. I'd snatched my Colt .45 semi-automatic from its shoulder holster as I rolled — I always carry it with the slide pulled and a shell chambered for instant fire power.

The shotgun twins had automatic weapons, with no plugs to limit them to five shots. The first two blasts shattered the wagon's windshield.

The wagon headlights made them perfect targets from chest to the top of their heads. I fired from prone position, clasping my weapon with both hands — Weaver method, right forefinger pulling the trigger; left thumb poised to cock the hammer, which you don't have to do with a Colt .45. Both men dropped before they could get off a second blast, which was lucky, because heads were popping up all through my wagon to see what was going on.

I was up and racing back, then, slamming a fresh clip into the butt of the Colt and pulling the slide. A fool had stepped out of a sedan

twenty yards behind the second wagon and was aiming a rifle. We learned later he'd jammed the magazine and couldn't shoot.

Dody had one shoulder braced against the side of her wagon and was squeezing off the contents of her Browning .25, as cool as if she was on the firing range. When the sedan door opened, the dome light went on, so she had a well lighted target, too.

I saw his knees buckle and the rifle drop out of his hand. The driver had thrown the sedan in reverse and shot backwards, swerving in and out of a ditch before he smacked into a telephone pole. He piled out with his hand reaching for the low overcast, screaming, "Don't kill me!"

I whizzed a .45 slug past his left ear for the hell of it. Dody thought I wasn't kidding and knocked up my gun arm.

I'd played the fool — not for the first time, but for the last, I hope. The driver thought we were going to kill him regardless of surrender. He went for his weapon, a "hog-leg" pistol six-shooter. I had to shove Dody away and put a slug through his right thigh to hold his fire.

The skies picked that moment to let down a torrent of rain that washed away the fog. Neither drivers nor musicians got out of the wagons. They'd been ordered not to, under any circumstances, and by a miracle, remembred.

The lead wagon had two-way civilian band radio I'd had installed before we left St. Louis. Mac called the highway patrol.

Dody went back to disarm and bandage the driver in the sedan part of the roadblock. The other man was very dead. She'd plinked all eight .25s into the kill-zone.

The shotgun twins were beyond recall, too. One had taken a .45 through the middle of his face, and there wasn't much left where it exited at the back of his head.

I'd dropped the second man with a shot through the throat and another high in his left chest. He spasmed and died before I could kneel down beside him.

All four were Kansas City criminal citizens with long records of everything from manslaughter to suspicion of murder, but no convictions. Professional "soldiers." Hired guns.

Rodger Alderson and his V. O. A.s were playing for keeps now.

The state police hospitalized the man I'd crippled in Lebanon under the name John Doe. The Kansas City lawyer with mob connections who showed in Springfield before the sun was up was given a hard time. He didn't locate his client until noon the next day.

The guy was a petty larceny hood who'd been hired to drive, and that was it. His piece of the action was sheer self defense, the way he told it, after talking with his lawyer.

Before his lawyer located "John Doe" he did tell a state police detective that \$100,000 was the head price on The White Hats. California money, it was rumored.

The shooting scrape near Lebanon made all of the wire services. The group had at least half a million dollars worth of publicity out of it. Back in Nashville, Howard was swamped with telegrams requesting bookings at fancy prices.

We drew S.R.O. crowds in Springfield, and over in Joplin, but Howard cancelled bookings at two clubs in Kansas City.

"No sense sticking your heads in the lion's mouth," he told Stacy over the phone.

Jasper phoned me in Joplin.

"No more traveling at night," he ordered.

Dody's name and picture stayed out of the news. So did mine, but that took some arm-twisting from St. Louis, and some of the editors didn't like it. We were simply named as "hired bodyguards" from a "national agency" and a few papers indicated we weren't much better than the thugs we'd gunned down.

Dody came to me with her feelings hurt.

"Are we supposed to turn the other cheek and try to prevail with sweet reason when we're waylaid on the road at night?" she asked. "I don't get it."

"We did our job the best we knew how," I told her. "Those edi-

tors you're talking about were home in bed when it happened, and have probably never fired a shot in anger all their lives. Are you satisfied we're not kill-crazy bodyguards?"

"I was there, Blake. Of course I am."

"Then, as the kids say, like forget it. We're out here in the field trying to keep them well and alive. So far we've succeeded."

"And that's all there is to it?"

"No. We'll wonder some day, if there wasn't a better way we could have handled the situation. Hind-sight is great. It keeps you awake nights. Maybe you'll have screaming nightmares, too. You're flesh, blood, and nerves and so am I."

Those hazel eyes with the golden flecks were curiously soft. "What was it really like in South Vietnam?"

"I took out a patrol of twenty-one men, right into an ambush. After the fight seven were dead and twelve were wounded. Two of the wounded died being evacuated. One lost a leg; another an arm. Two went off their rockers."

"And you?"

"I got the Purple Heart and a Silver Star. It made me feel real great."

"I guess I can live with having to kill a man," she said.

"Sure, but just don't sweat it. You'd be on a slab if he wasn't, and he'd be boozing it up with money collected for putting you there."

Dody Russell smiled. "You put things nicely sometimes," she said. "Thanks."

CANCELLED OUT OF Kansas City, The White Hats optioned to drive back to Hot Springs, Arkansas, for fun and games before they tackled the West Coast. Out there we were booked into San Diego, Los Angeles, Santa Barbara and San Francisco, with a tentative date up in Seattle before The White Hats took off on an S.R.O. tour to Southeast Asia.

While new windshields were being installed in the lead and second station wagon — some of those two shots had pocked the second wagon's glass — Joe and Mac had some second thoughts about continuing as drivers for The White Hats.

"I'm applying for my old job driving an armored truck," was the way Joe put it. "The take-home isn't as good, but it's a whole lot safer."

Mac said he'd just remembered that he had a family waiting for him in the Bronx.

"Me and the Old Lady mix it up once in awhile," he told me, "but she doesn't own a shotgun, or even an air pistol."

Stacy paid them off.

"What do we do for drivers?" he asked me.

"I'll phone my boss and state our problem," I told him. "Jasper will have some ideas."

His first idea was that Dody and I should take over the driving chore.

"You're both licensed to drive," he said.

"But not crazy enough to do it in this situation," I told him. "This assignment was pretty rough the other night, but I don't think we've seen anything yet. Between Dody and me, we've just laid to rest three K. C. 'soldiers' and wounded a fourth one. That makes the organization look bad, you know. Their next try will be more sophisticated. It's a matter of honor, now."

"Blake, I'm sorry, but I have to agree with you," Jasper said. "You'll get your drivers."

"When? These kids want to go back to Hot Springs for a ball. They want to leave tonight. Any further night driving is out, so it will be tomorrow morning, but there's a time element. We're opening in San Diego a week from today."

"I'll have drivers over there for you tomorrow," Jasper said.

He sent a pair of real pros—Scotty Pentecost, a retired stock car champion who lives in Clayton, Missouri, and Stan Whellis, who drove Jeep for General Patton during World War II. Both men reported armed. So as well as drivers, now Dody and I had troops.

Whellis was graying, but looked much younger than his forty-five years. Scotty was a mild-mannered, husky man who'd wrestled stocks around so many tight turns his forearms were as muscled as my legs.

Both men were crack shots.

It was a milk run to Hot Springs. There was some kind of convention in town.

Our motel reservations had me worried.

It was a large motel with the units surrounding a swimming pool and wide, long court. Dody and Cherry were quartered in the first unit in from the main highway. The four boys had a suite at the rear of the court.

Whellis and Scotty shared a small unit away from the rest of us, in a back-lot section of the motel. I had a single over the motel's office, across from the unit Dody and Cherry shared.

I'd convinced myself that the K. C. powers that be would make their second strike before we hauled out for the coast. The boys wanted to do the town. I sent Whellis and Pentecost along to see they stayed out of trouble.

From my unit I could watch Dody and Cherry trying out the swimming pool. Days didn't worry me too much. The nights did. Still, I sat beside my window where I could watch the girls. Couldn't be too careful.

Dody wasn't showing off, but her diving was obviously so skilled it attracted attention, so I wasn't too surprised when a pair of clean-cut, sport-shirted types engaged Dody and Cherry in what looked like casual conversation from where I sat, my feet on the windowsill and



a cold bottle of beer in my right fist.

The four of them began to leave the pool area. I forgot the beer and my feet hit the floor. Dody and Cherry were a step ahead of their companions; Dody shot a quick

glance over her shoulder toward the window of my room.

I had the message. I was watching the kidnap of two girls in broad daylight, from the pool area of a crowded motel.

Their immediate destination was a black T-Bird parked across the court. Neither station wagon was on the premises, by my instructions. Both were in a garage a block away.

Each clean-cut had his right hand in his trousers pocket, so the girls were covered. Young kids were in and around the pool, and scattered out on the playground equipment all over the court. There was no chance to shoot at the T-Bird's tires or gas tank from my position. I had a single advantage. The kidnapers didn't seem to know they were under surveillance.

A call to the police wouldn't bring help until the girls were in the T-Bird. That would set up an entirely new set of circumstances. The boys would have hostages. Anything could develop out of that deal!

I kicked off my shoes and took the stairs to the ground floor in three jumps. I'd left my Colt in its shoulder holster hooked over the back of my chair, but that wasn't an oversight. If what I had in mind didn't come off, I'd have no use for the .45.

Sprinting full blast through a crowded motel-pool area and playground is a bit different from broken field unning. I had to vault

one curly-haired five year old girl who stood in my way, gaping.

"You call *that* jogging?" a bright young blonde asked, giggling.

Mothers snatched their little ones out of my path. One elderly man stopped, grinned widely, and clapped for me, his cane hooked over his arm.

The clean-cuts were crowding Dody and Cherry from behind as they came within ten paces of the T-Bird. I couldn't worry about that. Any broken bones they sustained would heal, in time. What the clean-cuts had in mind for them was something else.

Dody saw me coming from the corner of her eyes, and reacted instantly, shoving Cherry so hard she sprawled into the tail end of the T-Bird and cut her knee on the bumper guard.

Dody dropped flat on her face. This sudden action was enough to keep the clean-cuts diverted that extra split second I needed to launch my block.

I body-blocked the one on the right waist high and leg-whipped his partner down. It was a rolling block that brought me back on my feet, facing them.

Both were game, and tried to haul their guns, stunned as they were.

One had sandy hair; the other was swarthy. Dody swung a long leg and kicked the sandy-haired boy in the throat, putting him flat on his back and out of action, but

she followed through with a second more vicious kick just to make sure.

The swarthy one was on his knees and coming up so I neck-tackled him, slamming him down as hard as I could. Dody administered a second of her vicious kicks to my prey, and we had a pair of Kansas City hoods writhing in agony. I collected their weapons.

"You're a mean one, sure enough!" I told her. "I was about to clip him one on the chin. That would have put him out."

Her face was a pale mask of hate.

"He talked to us," she said, nodding toward the swarthy hood. "All the time they had us covered."

"About what they had in mind for you and Cherry?"

Dody nodded.

As a simple precaution, I grasped her right ankle. "Cool it," I ordered. "See to Cherry."

"Yes, Blake." The hate was fading. "I'm sorry."

"Cherry's crying. See what she wants." I was busy frisking the hoods.

A siren wail coming closer told me that I wouldn't have to call the police.

Cherry was crying because she'd cut her knee and there were a few drops of blood. Cherry couldn't stand the sight of blood, especially her own.

"I'm going to faint," I heard her say, "and I don't want to, in this swim suit. It wouldn't be decent."

Dody's peal of laughter wasn't hysteria.

"Don't faint," she told Cherry. "Be Victorian and swoon. In the meantime, I'll find a band aid."

We'd drawn a crowd.

"The police are coming," I told them. "Will you give these boys a little breathing room? They've had an accident."

"What happened?" a woman asked.

I didn't have to answer.

"I saw it all," another woman said. "They tripped and fell. They ought to sue the management."

"Maybe they were drunk," a man said.

I felt sorry for the writhing hoods. Dody's foot had done more damage than my clip and head tackle, but with the gathering crowd they had to grin and bear it.

I heaved a mighty sigh of relief when the police squad car finally turned in off the main highway.

Ralph Bellini was the swarthy clean-cut. He was wanted for bank robbery, two counts, and Murder One, three counts. The sandy-haired boy had delicate features, and a shy manner. He was wanted for forcible rape, kidnaping, assault with intent to kill, auto theft (three counts), and non-support of two minor children. A real nice kid!

Dody and I adjourned to the coffee shop.

"When we've finished this assignment," I promised her, "I'll buy you a drink."

"If we finish it alive," she said, "I'll consider your offer. So far, I don't drink, but I'm thinking I might take it up."

Stacy and Court drifted in and found us.

"Hey, what's new and different?" Stacy asked. "You two missed a ball. In the middle of the afternoon, no less, we were in this place, and these two guys got into a fight over a girl."

"It sure was far out," Court said.

"It's been quiet and dull around here," Dody said, and winked at me.

IT WAS TEN PAST midnight when the phone rang.

"You don't know me," the low voice on the other end of the line said, before I could say anything, "so the name is of no consequence. The people I represent now feel that they've made an error. You know how it is, running a big business. Sometimes we don't check out our customers the way we should."

"I'm not with you yet," I told him. "Can you make it plainer?"

"We've lost a few employees lately. That's all right, however. Sometimes you win; other times you lose. What the hell? No one is perfect."

"So you're cancelling a certain contract?"

"You have it."

The man had a pleasant, cultured voice.

"There's been a meeting. There

was a vote. You and Miss Russell can relax as far as our organization is concerned. By the way, Nethery, we've always admired your football style, because you played a clean game."

"Thanks."

"What's the penalty for clipping?" he asked, with a chuckle, and broke the connection.

I jiggled until I had the motel operator. "Where did that last call come from?"

"It was placed in Kansas City, from a public booth."

I thanked her and enjoyed a sound sleep.

The next morning I reported to Dody.

"The pros have resigned," I told her. "Change of heart; change of mind, and their losses were adding up too fast. I got the word from K. C. last night."

She knew what I was talking about. "Maybe they want to catch us with our guard down."

"I've thought about that, but I doubt it. Now we have only the lunatic fringe trying to wipe out The White Hats. Roger T. isn't resigning, and you can bet on it!"

There was a thoughtful look in those hazel eyes. "I'm remembering a Greek legend," she said. "The one about the Gordian Knot."

"The one that comes to my mind," I told her, "is the Labors of Hercules. He was strong but stupid. No, just forget about going

after Roger T. Alderson in his walled fief."

"Isn't the best defense a strong and aggressive offense?"

"Murder is one game, football another."

"Any rich man who builds a wall around himself and recruits an army of bully-boys has to be a coward," Dody mused. "Sadistic, too, of course, but isn't that another manifestation of cowardice? It was when I went to Vassar. Don't dare laugh, I am a Vassar girl, and proud of it."

"Who's laughing? It's a great school. That's why the jokes."

"You're the agent in charge of this show, Blake. So far you've batted 1000. Don't let me jar your elbow now."

"Mine's a pretty hard elbow to jar. Exactly what's on your mind?"

"New trouble is going to start as soon as we open in San Diego. It will get worse before it gets better. In Santa Barbara will come the crunch. They can do it to us, Blake."

"Do what?"

"Make it impossible for The White Hats to perform. I like these kids, even Cherry. I want to see them make it."

"So do I."

"I like performing. You don't. Do you know that you're a terrible guitarist?"

"I know, all right, but are all you Vassar girls so damned candid? You've shot a hole in my ego."

Dody grinned. "You heal fast." She was then serious. "You can't do anything about audience control when you're on stage pretending to play the guitar."

"You mean in San Diego the heckling from the audience starts, and I'm supposed to do something about it. Like what?"

"I'm sure you'll think of something," Dody said airily, and changed the subject.

I had a talk with Stacy. He was relieved by my suggestion that he contact Howard back in Nashville and have a professional guitarist sent out to meet us when we opened in San Diego.

I resolved to give up the guitar, then and there.

Our drivers took us out to the coast without a hitch. We were booked into the Club Nacional for a week down there. It's more of an auditorium than it is a club; seats five hundred at tables, with room for another one hundred at the long bar. The group ahead of us, some punks who called themselves The Generation Gap, had specialized in smut and dirty lyrics, with emphasis on Pot, LSD, and even STP.

The management wasn't happy — better paying customers stayed away in droves after their opening night — and the police would have liked to close them down, but it got to be a Thing. The beard and serape crowd picketed the place.

Freedom of expression got into



it (new term for free speech, so it can include stripping on stage, boys kissing boys, and so on).

The White Hats came into San Diego with a good advance press, dramatized by the shoot-out east of Lebanon, and the foiled kidnaping in Hot Springs.

Tommy Joyce, the new guitar player, joined us at the U. S. Grant in San Diego. He was a lanky Nashville boy with a name in country music who wanted part of the new beat. Stacy started re-arranging their numbers to work in some solo guitar bits.

In security work you need eyes in the back of your head. Dody and I had been looking to the right for trouble so long that the New Left

caught us with our guards down. Opening night at the Club Nacional was a disaster.

The bearded ones and their unwashed females were down on The White Hats because they'd seen combat in South Vietnam, which made them "imperialist pigs". Their clean lyrics also damned them, and a few religious numbers, plus a patriotic song or two, slammed the dog house door.

Nitty-Gritty, San Diego's underground newspaper, specializing in four-letter words and lewd pictures, sounded the tocsin. We got it all that opening night—heckling, stink bombs, thrown fruit and vegetables, and there I was on the look out for youngsters with V.O.A. buttons in their lapels!

The management had to call the police, which immediately raised the "Police brutality!" screech, and two officers had to be hospitalized before seven beards and two unwashed females were hauled to the pokey for taking off their clothes in downtown San Diego.

The Garcia brothers, who own and manage the Casa Nacional, looked at their wrecked place of business the next day, read the headlines, and decided to cancel the rest of The White Hats' engagement. As mad as this move made Dody and me, it wasn't any of our business, so we kept our mouths shut.

Stacy didn't. He went to the two local newspapers; sat in on an after-

noon TV talk show, and sent a wire to J. C. Howard.

Howard hopped a plane in Nashville and started building the head of steam that exploded in the Garcia brothers' office at the club an hour before showtime.

"Cancel out and you'll not only buy their contract, but we'll sue for every cent you have, and slap plasters all over this joint you own," he told them. He was a wiry, little man with crewcut spiky red hair and a florid face that resembled the maps of Ireland—not the kind of character I'd choose to fool with.

"But you can't do that to us!" the older Garcia said. The expression on his face indicated that he thought otherwise, however.

Howard grinned like a wolf. "Do you want to bet? If you don't stand your ground, every other cowardly club owner in Los Angeles, Santa Barbara, San Francisco, and Seattle is going to cancel. I can't decide whether we'll sue you fellows for a million or a million and a half in lost revenue."

As a student of the law I was wincing inwardly, but I kept a happy smile on my face.

The younger Garcia caught fire. He slammed his fist on his older brother's desk.

"The show goes on!" For no reason that was apparent, he shook Howard's hand, and then mine.

Dody moved clear before he kissed her on both cheeks.

"Do you understand Spanish?" he asked.

"No."

"*Bueno!*" Ramon Garcia then lit into his older brother in that language.

Frank Garcia kept throwing up his hands in protest. Ramon kept hammering gutter Spanish. Frank finally spread his hands and shrugged philosophically.

"My brother says we are not cowards," was his simple translation. "We're sorry to put you to all of this trouble and expense, Senor Howard, but you will be recompensed".

The beards were back, in larger numbers, but something new had been added—a group of choral singers traveling with *Up with America* for their slogan, arrived in San Diego a day ahead of schedule and came to the second performance en masse. Thirty college boys; thirty college girls—sixty strong and beautiful voices. Stacy got the pitch right away.

The White Hats led a sing-in that drowned the beards' heckling tactics. It was a sound riot and the paying customers loved it.

I'd hatched a plot for crowd control for that second night. It probably wasn't necessary, but I moved out on it, anyway. My hired infiltrators suggested to the beards that they resume their demonstration after the performance when The White Hats would have to run a two-block gauntlet to their station wagons.

We made it to the U.S. Grant in hired limousines, instead of cabs.

When the beards realized they'd been duped, they decided to take it out on The White Hats' station wagons, but a picked riot squad of San Diego police officers were in the shadows of the dark parking lot. As those things go, it was a pretty fair rumble, because most of the beards were high on booze or pot. I'd sneaked out to watch parking lot developments. One of the beards recognized me, and I was in the scuffle.

I got a split lip and a black eye. Four of the beards were hospitalized, in the same hospital where two San Diego officers were recovering from the opening night fuss.

The riot squad almost booked me for assault and battery.

"How do we explain it when they howl the police brutality bit this time, Nethery?" the lieutenant in charge asked me. "You could have killed somebody!"

"I was very careful not to do that," I protested. "I only used my fists and my feet, once or twice, with tire irons and switch blades scattered all over the place. Evidently, none on their side ever played football."

I'd guess that's when the young lieutenant decided not to book me, because he laughed, and said. "There is the understatement of the year."

I'm proud to say I didn't clip a single beard. All of my body blocks were thrown legally.

Dody buzzed me like a Texas red hornet while she daubed my esplit lip, and insisted I keep the raw beef on my swelling right eye.

Cherry was rolling around with laughter.

"Why don't you two kiss and make up?" she suggested finally.

Dody turned beet red.

"With this lip?" I said. "Are you kidding?"

The White Hats were held over for a second week at the Club Nacional, performed to S.R.O. crowds, and there were no further incidents.

LOS ANGELES was routine. Excellent crowds, good reception; no heckling problems. The beards had decided their best policy was to ignore the group. That suited Dody and me fine. We managed a couple of quiet suppers together along restaurant row on La Cieniga. I even bought her that drink I'd promised. She ordered the specialty of the house, and I was mean enough not to tell her it was made from seven different kinds of rum.

The next morning she checked the bartender at the restaurant, and then gave me hell. I guess I had it coming. She'd had quite a crying jag in the taxi going back to the Roosevelt Hotel.

Once again my phone rang in the middle of the night. "Is this Blake Nethery?" a high-pitched but masculine voice asked this time.

"Speaking."

"I'm Rodger T. Alderson."

I couldn't think of anything to say to that, except, "What do you want?"

"A new kind of America," was his surprising answer. "Don't you agree with me that some drastic changes must be made if this nation is to survive?"

"I'm not a deep thinker," I said, stalling.

"Few are, so don't feel too badly about it," Rodger said, patronizingly. "They fiddle while Rome burns."

"I'm a guitar man, myself," I said, beginning to enjoy this crazy dialogue, "so speak for yourself."

"Certain strains in the American pattern must be eliminated, or, perhaps, *exterminated* is a more honest word to use, so you see . . ."

I was no longer enjoying. "It's late and you've wakened me out of a sound sleep," I said, "so make your threat and get the hell off the phone."

The pitch of his voice changed. It was more like the hiss of a snake now.

"Bring your little group into my town," he said, "and neither you nor the girl with you will leave it alive."

"That sounds like a threat, Mr. Alderson."

"It is not a threat. It is a promise."

"I hope you try to keep that promise," I told him, "because we're opening in Santa Barbara the day

after tomorrow. May I send you a complimentary ticket?"

There was a click on the other end of the line.

I had a phone-chat the next morning with the Santa Barbara police. Alderson's estate was outside the city limits. They had only a faint idea of what went on within its walls.

"Alderson pays his taxes and acts the gentleman in our jurisdiction," the officer I was speaking with told me. "The C.H.P. has shaken down the estate a few times, but with no results. A lot of blue-shirted boys around the premises, but polite and unarmed. It's too bad you didn't monitor that call."

"Maybe the F.B.I. did."

"I wouldn't know about that," he said, guardedly.

Jasper Lundon called me from St. Louis that afternoon. "Rumor says you've been threatened," he said. Jasper and J. Edgar Hoover are the same generation. "Miss Russell, too. Certain quarters are concerned."

"Are you taking us off this assignment?" I asked.

Jasper's was a dry chuckle. "You'd quit me if I tried to, and so would Miss Russell. No, stick with The White Hats, but watch your step, and always look behind you."

"I'll do that, Jasper, and thanks."

When we'd finished our conversation, I decided that Dody deserved a freedom of choice, since she'd been threatened too.



My chivalry impulse was over active, I guess, or maybe it was remorse about letting her swallow all that rum.

"Maybe you should skip Santa Barbara," I told her, while we were having lunch, "and fly directly to San Francisco to meet us there."

She knew about my phone call last night.

"And take Cherry with me, I suppose?"

"No. She's part of the group."

"So am I, you may have forgotten, but there's a little more to it than that. You're not about to treat me as your equal, are you? That isn't flattering, you know. I'm paid to take the same risks you are."

"What would you like for dessert?"

"Changing the subject?"

I grinned at her. "I'm trying to."

Dody smiled. "Thank you. I'll have ice cream."

We made an early start for Santa Barbara. Scotty was driving the lead wagon, and I was on the front seat beside him. Dody was riding with Stan Whellis. U.S. 101 was our route, the road that hugs the coast from Santa Monica through Oxnard and Ventura to Santa Barbara.

I'd rented a car and made a run up to Santa Barbara the day before to select a motel and make reservations so it would be easy to protect The White Hats. I don't want the scattered out setup we'd run into back in Hot Springs.

I'd selected a motel beyond Santa Barbara, in a small lake town called Ynez.

It was a small hotel, so I'd reserved all six units for the three days we'd be there. Between Dody, Stan, Scotty, and I, I figured we would be able to hold off a battalion of blue shirts, if it came to that.

I have a private pilot's license. Partly to relax; partly to "know your enemy," as we're taught in military training. I overflew the Rodger T. Alderson estate in the hills east of Santa Barbara.

After circling at one thousand feet, I put the nose down and buzzed the hundred acres, north to south; east to west.

I photographed for my memory the entire layout—the two-story Spanish house in the middle of the grounds with its expansive interior

patio, the large stables near it, a barracks-type building where I assumed his bodyguards were stationed, the swimming pool a short distance behind the house, and I had a close look at the six-foot stone and cement walls topped with three strands of barbed wire that was electrified.

Rodger T. certainly wasn't taking chances that he'd have unexpected visitors!

The first time I buzzed the estate it looked deserted. By the time I'd made my turn and come around for the east-west buzz-over, however, half a dozen men were staring up from the area of the barracks. A man in a white summer suit was looking up from the interior patio. I decided it was time to fly back to the airport.

They had the Cessna's number. My right name was signed to the rental papers. It had to be because it was on my license. A nagging feeling persisted that maybe I'd over-played my hand.

Owner of the plane rental service was Jack Blackstone. I told him exactly who I was and what I was doing when I got back to the airport.

"As a favor," I said, "I'd appreciate it if you'd cover for me. If Alderson phones, I mean, asking for information."

Jack grinned. "Don't worry about it. I detest the man. I also know he's dangerous, but no one else around here seems to realize that."

Did you spot his atomic bomb shelter?"

"No."

"It's about a hundred yards behind the house, near the swimming pool. My kid brother took a summer job out there helping excavate for it a year back. It's really a swank layout, I hear. Running water and all the modern conveniences."

Jack told me something else. "At night he has dogs roaming the grounds, some really vicious brutes. War surplus guard dogs he's retrained. With them around, he and his blue-shirted kooks can get their sleep."

The phone rang before I left Jack's airport office.

"Why, that was a reporter, Mr. Alderson," I heard him say. He'll be calling you in a day or two for a personal interview. No, I don't know what paper or magazine he's with, but I'll find out if he shows up again."

Jack winked when he'd hung up. "So much for that. I'd like to hear The White Hats, but the auditorium is sold out."

"How many comps do you want?"

"Just for the wife and me. The kids bought their own."

I obliged him with a pair of free tickets.

CLOSE TO CARPENTERIA, both front tires of my wagon blew at the same time. We were doing an even seventy mph, and it took all

of Scotty's thirty years of experience driving hot stocks to bring us to a safe stop.

"Damn, I've never known that to happen before," Scotty said.

Dody's wagon passed us, slowing down, and parked on the shoulder about a hundred yards ahead of us. Whellis came out of his side of the car and started striding back. The kids riding with Dody spilled out of the wagon, too.

I was in front of our wagon by this time to assess tire damage. We'd run through a belt of those tire-ruining devices devised during World War II — six-pointed steel "jacks" that will punch through any thickness of rubber.

I swung around just in time to see three men toss Dody into a sedan and take off, burning rubber. It wasn't possible to read the mud-smeared license plates.

I'd overlooked the fact that murder and kidnapers for pay don't all group in Kansas City, Chicago, Detroit, and New York City. Like everything else these days, it's a diversified business.

From Alderson's midnight conversation I'd expected trouble in Santa Barbara, which is exactly why he'd called, I decided.

Kidnaping is a waiting game. We drove on to Santa Barbara, but reported what had happened to the F.B.I. along the way. Our motel on Lake Cachuma swarmed with special agents when we checked in.

The sedan with the mud-spat-

tered plates had been found ten miles down the highway toward Los Angeles. A passing motorist had seen three men and a girl get in to another car there. The phone call, when it came, was traced to a public both in East Los Angeles.

Terms were simple. Money was no object. Dody would stay alive and safe if The White Hats didn't perform in either Santa Barbara or San Francisco. They would also have to disband as a group. The call had been placed to me.

"I've never heard anything as crazy as this," the special agent on the other phone told me, when I'd hung up. "It doesn't make any sense."

"If you're power-crazy and have to prove it, it does," I said.

So far we'd kept the press out of this, but if the boys and Cherry didn't open in Santa Barbara, the fat was in the fire.

From descriptions, the F.B.I. had narrowed suspects in the kidnaping to three of five men. Shoe prints on the shoulder of the road were evidence when it would be needed for a conviction. Every informer was alerted in the area.

The White Hats were supposed to open the next night. Stacy came to me.

"We've taken a vote," he said, "and we've decided to call it a day."

"You've forgotten something," I said. "Dody Russell is a trained investigator. No matter what their orders are, the snatchers can't let

her go alive. She'd be too damned dangerous if any one of them was picked up."

There was a second call. This one we couldn't trace. Dody spoke only one sentence. "I'm alive and well, so far."

By that night, two of the five "possibles" had been located, and eliminated as suspects. The intensive F.B.I. search was concentrated in the Los Angeles area. They'd found the second stolen car with stolen license plates near Santa Monica. No fingerprints or other evidence.

They were keeping a watch on the Alderson estate but nothing out of the ordinary was going on out there.

"If he's behind this thing," the agent in charge told me, "he'd be a fool to have the girl on his place, and there's a chance he isn't involved."

He wouldn't tell me anything more than that. It was only later that I found out Dody was the daughter of a very wealthy New England manufacturer, and that her people had received ransom notes asking half a million for her safe return.

Waiting isn't my game. There was also something else. It's hard to put in words, but I was getting a message—*Come and get me!* I'm not what they call a "Psychic," or anything like that, but I'd sprawl on my bed in my motel room; I'd pace

the floor; I'd go outside and stare up at the stars.

Come and get me!

I couldn't stand it by the time it was twelve o'clock, straight up, so I leafed through the yellow pages, to discover Santa Barbara had six veterinarians. The first one I called thought I was drunk, perverted, or crazy.

The second one was drunk.

The third vet had just what I needed — a female white collie. I told the F.B.I. men watching at the motel that I was driving into Santa Barbara for a six-pack of beer.

I disappeared in the direction of Santa Barbara in one of the station wagons, and drove right on into the town, as a matter of fact, because I had to pick up my collie.

From there I used back roads to reach the east perimeter of the Alderson estate. From the top of the wagon, driven right up under the wall, I managed to boost the collie over the electrified strands.

I waited ten minutes for nature to take its course, and then vaulted the electrified fence myself, somersaulting to break my fall.

There wasn't a dog in sight under the bright moonlight, nor a guard. It was ridiculously easy to walk right on in to the Spanish main house, skirting the swim pool, and step into Alderson's study.

He spun around, to stare into the muzzle of my Colt. It was cocked.

"Pick up that phone and call the



F.B.I.," I told him. I kept my voice down. "Tell them to come out here for the girl."

He was a tall, thin man, with fluffy white hair, and a tanned, rather handsome face, if you ignored the cruel downturned mouth. The sight of me and my gun had made him pale under his tan, but he said, "All I have to do is press a button. Twenty young men are on this estate as my bodyguard. You've broken and entered my premises. You're armed and threatening me."

"You'd have to turn around in that swivel chair to reach the button," I told him. "Instead of blowing out your face by putting a slug in the back of your head, I'd shoot you in the right upper arm, shattering the bone."

Alderson was paler under his tan, so I knew that he'd taken me at my word.

"You can get yourself out of this fix, any way you can," I told him.

"If it was me, I'd explain to the authorities that my young men were the heroes who rescued Miss Russell from her abductors, and brought her here for safe-keeping. I won't back your yarn, but I won't take the stand and call you a liar. How do I know that isn't the way it was?"

Alderson was listening intently, and thinking.

"Suppose you're brave enough to risk a shattered right arm," I went on. "Your bully boys come tearing up here from the barracks. 'Get him!', you could order, and I suppose one or two would have guts enough to unlimber, but what about you?"

"What about me?"

"I could use you as a shield, but I don't think so. That's too risky. I'd prefer to blow your head off, put a few shots where they'd do the most good in other directions, and then run for it."

"How did you get past my dogs?" Alderson asked.

I grinned at him. "I'm glad you've asked. It wasn't original. I believe Willie Sutton used it once or twice, but a bitch in heat is much more interesting, even to male watch dogs, than an intruder. Facts of life."

Alderson managed a shaky grin. "In a way, I admire you, Nethery."

"It isn't mutual. Is Dody in your atom bomb shelter? Is she alone?"

"How do you know about . . . ?" Alderson stopped, and then said,

"I'll have to turn around to make that phone call."

"Hold it a sec." I eased around his desk. "Now do it."

Alderson moved slowly, dialed the right number, said the right things, and fifteen minutes later the estate was swarming with F.B.I., Santa Barbara police, and the C.H.P. I'd had a quiet word with Dody about my deal with Alderson before the influx started.

"Fact of the matter is," she said, "I was drugged as soon as they got me in their car. I woke up down here. All I could do was pray and hope that you'd somehow, come get me."

"I got your message," I told her.

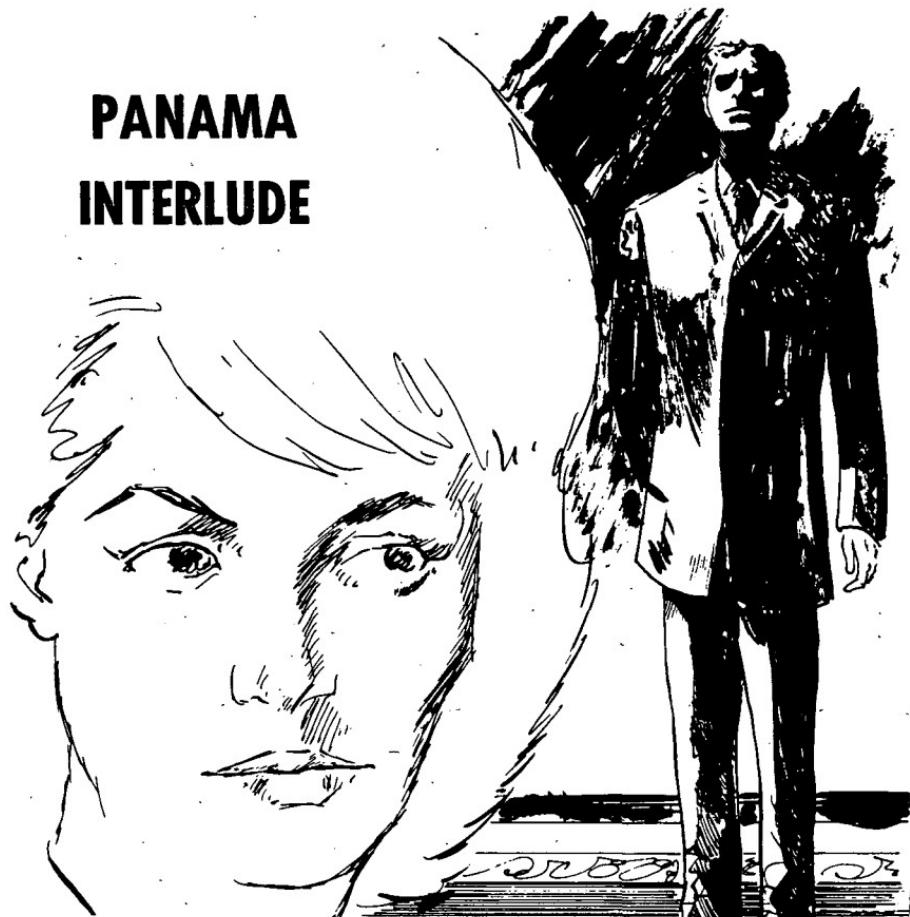
Alderson didn't quite get away with his story. They convicted him of complicity in a kidnaping.

The stockpile of rifles, machine guns, bazookas, hand guns, and ammunition enough to start and stop a small war was found stored in the basement of his Spanish home, and the court didn't quite believe he was a weapon collector. Another five years was added to his term in the pen.

With The White Hats off on their S.R.O. tour, with Cherry Whitten now married to Stacy Latimore, Dody and I returned to St. Louis to report, and then split. We reported to Jasper, all right, but we didn't split.

Dody has retired from private investigation work and bodyguarding to keep house out in Kirkwood.

PANAMA INTERLUDE



Death was his trade, and business was good. And—I was his next one to die!

by JOSEPH C. STACEY

THE AIRLINER landed at the Panama City Paitilla Airport, from where Sebastian took a cab to the Hotel Umberto.

It was fiesta time in the country.

The streets were jammed with people in colorful costumes. They paraded around the city, dancing, singing and having a merry time.

It was slow driving, but Sebas-

tian's cab finally reached *Avenida Norte* and deposited him before the hotel.

He registered as a Frank Lowell, from New York City, and was shown up to a suite. He locked the door after the bellhop left, washed up, went into the bedroom and unlocked his suitcase.

He took out a gun and a silencer; then he went downstairs to the dining room, had something to eat, drink, and went outside and stood on the sidewalk and watched the gaiety in the street for awhile.

A pretty young girl and a handsome young man were dancing the *Tamborito*, a dance originated centuries ago by the slaves who were brought into Panama by the early colonists.

The girl had gone into the dance circle first. She was lifting her feet slowly, moving her hips rhythmically, twisting and turning to provoke her partner. He entered the ring, then with a great leap, as though impelled by irresistible desire. She drew back in mock fright, then moved toward him, flogging him with her skirt, but at the same time continuing her coquettish movements, repeating the scene over and over again and making it more alluring each time.

Musicians, on the *caja*, *pujador*, and *repocador* drums, and on the *bolillos* sticks beat out the rhythm for them.

Sebastian had seen the dance before, when the syndicate sent him

down to Panama City some years ago to lay low, until a certain witness, who'd seen him hit a mark, could be eliminated back in the States.

He looked at his watch. It was after nine. He lit a cigarette and started for the *Cafe Amigo*. At the *toldos*, specially constructed booths and stands, on each and every street corner, people were laughing and drinking and singing "Guarare" and "Mi Negro" and other traditional folk songs.

He reached the *Cafe Amigo* and saw that it had not changed since the last time he was in it years ago. It was still pretty much of a dump. He shouldered his way to the bar and ordered a drink. In one corner of the place, a piano beat out "Mi Negro."

He finished his drink and went over and stood behind the blonde-haired piano player and listened to him play. The piano player's name was Eddie Dean; he finished "Mi Negro," and Sebastian said, "Play 'I'll Be Glad When You're Dead, You Rascal, You,' Eddie."

Eddie Dean's body stiffened. After awhile, he turned around slowly. There was terror in his eyes.

"So you finally found us?" he said. There was terror in his voice, too.

Sebastian smiled. "I promised I would."

"You won't get away with it."

"Sure, I will, Eddie," Sebastian said. "And you know it."

Sweat beaded Dean's forehead.

Sebastian said, "Be a good boy, Eddie. Don't get any smart ideas. If I have to, I'll kill you right here and now. With the confusion that'll follow, it will be a simple thing for me to get away. Then I'd head for the Hotel Bolivar and Ann. Her death wouldn't be a pleasant one. Not if you made it tough for me here. Understand me, Eddie?"

Eddie Dean nodded.

A big fat man came over. He looked like an American. "Anything wrong, kid?" he asked Eddie in English.

Dean shook his head.

"Then how about pounding the piano?" he said good-naturedly. "That's what I'm paying you to do."

Sebastian said, "Get yourself a new boy, fellow. Eddie just quit."

The fat cafe owner lifted an eyebrow at Eddie Dean.

"Tell the man," said Sebastian.

Dean nodded.

"Shall we go?" Sebastian asked.

Dean took his coat from the top of the piano and put it on; then he and Sebastian went out into the noisy night. A dark-haired girl came off the street and showered them with confetti. Another threw her arms around Sebastian's neck and kissed him. Then she kissed Dean.

Two policemen and a soldier stood on the corner. The soldier had a rifle.

"Remember, Eddie, don't make it tough for me," Sebastian warned.

The soldier and the policemen

did not give Sebastian and Dean more than a passing glance. The two men rounded the corner and walked the four blocks to the Hotel Bolivar in silence. The hotel was definitely second-rate. Sebastian followed Dean up a flight of stairs to the second floor. Dean stopped before a door and knocked.

"Eddie?" a woman's voice inquired.

"Yeah," Eddie Dean said.

A key clicked in the lock and the door opened.

"Hello, baby," Sebastian greeted.

She did not say anything. She just looked at him. If she was frightened, or surprised to see him, she did not show it. She looked tired, instead. She stepped aside and the two men came into the room.

Sebastian closed and locked the door. He leaned his back against it and ran his eyes over her. She was still very pretty.

He said, "You shouldn't have left me for Eddie, baby."

Eddie Dean turned on him. "What did you expect her to do after she—"

Sebastian smiled. "After what? After she found out I killed a couple of guys?"

Ann said, "Don't bother to explain to him, Eddie. You can't explain anything to a person like him."

Sebastian went over and sat down in a wicker chair. He took out the gun and the silencer. He screwed the silencer onto the gun.

"You two were lucky in Mexico City, baby," he said. "I got there just two days after you divorced me, married Eddie and took a plane to Buenos Aires. In Buenos Aires, I learned you fled to La Paz, then to Bogota. In Bogota, I lost all track of you."

He stopped and listened to the noisy celebration outside in the street for several moments. Then he said, "I lost track of you two or three years; then a friend of mine saw you here, in Panama City, five days ago."

Ann went over and sat down upon a divan. She did not look at either Eddie Dean or Sebastian. She said, "If I went back to you, Johnny—if I went back, would you promise not to harm Eddie?"

Dean said, "No, Ann. No. I wouldn't want to go on living that way."

Sebastian said, "You won't have to, Eddie. I don't want her back."

"Then, why—"

"A matter of pride, Eddie, for one thing. For another, that letter the cops received the day you two beat it to Mexico City: Quote, 'Johnny Sebastian killed Big Jim Denke and only God knows how many others,' unquote. It was most annoying to me and the syndicate, even though nothing ever came out of it. There's such a thing as proof, which neither one of you had, nor the cops could get."

He stood up and listened to the gay hilarity in the streets again; then

he said, "It took seven long years, but—"

A pounding on the room door cut him short.

"Open up in the name of the law," a voice commanded.

Johnny Sebastian fired three times. Two bullets struck Ann, the third one missed Eddie. Ann crumpled to the floor and Eddie came leaping to his feet.

Johnny backed away from him. He said, "So long, Eddie," but he never pulled the trigger.

A policeman shot him four times from the balcony outside the window. Johnny Sebastian died on his feet. The door was smashed open and three policemen and the fat cafe owner rushed into the room.

Eddie and the cafe owner were in the hospital, where an operation had saved Ann's life.

"Thanks, Sam," Dean finally got around to saying. "If it hadn't been for you getting the police—" He stopped and looked at the cafe owner. "But how did you know about Sebastian?"

Sam Burke said, "Ann told me once, kid. She said her ex-husband, a professional killer, was looking for you two to gun you. Well, when this guy showed up tonight, I was pretty damn sure he was Sebastian."

"How?"

"By the way you looked when he was talking to you, kid. You looked scared as hell."

Eddie Dean nodded.

"I was," he said.



FROZEN ASSETS

He followed me, watched my every move, waited for me to betray myself. But he didn't know one thing. I had a miracle up my sleeve ...

by

EDWARD WELLER

A CATHEDRAL hush held the courtrom as the foreman rose. He darted harried looks at the three women on the jury, then voiced the verdict. The judge nailed the outburst of clapping.

Steve Palmer appeared not to have moved in his wheelchair, but he sank back within himself. He had won, and won big.

The defense lawyer had tap-tapped the pointer against the x-ray plates and asked where, where, where was the spinal damage. But

he hadn't accomplished a damn thing. It was criminal negligence that caused the fall of the elevator and condemned the rising young man to a wheelchair, and sneering words like "psychosomatic" and "negative myelograms" couldn't alter that fact.

The melting eyes and warm little smiles of the lady jurors as they filed in had reassured Steve. But now it was on the record. Nothing short of suspending the laws of nature could change that.

As for the laws of man, not only had the jurors found for him but they had awarded him one of the biggest judgments ever. Four million dollars free and clear for losing the use of his legs.

Say the judge or the appeals court felt that sum excessive and halved it. Even two million wouldn't give you hay fever. You could live high on the interest alone. Steve Palmer was set for life — and for living.

He smiled sad gratitude at the lady jurors. He'd love to show Juror Number Six the time of her life. He remembered from the impaneling that the svelte blonde was a divorcee. Better not. If the insurance people found out, they'd slap him with a charge of collusion or subornation or whatever. He gave the sad gratitude he aimed at her a twist of wistfulness. She flushed happily and touched her handkerchief to her eyes.

After that it was a blur till he found himself alone, or almost alone, outside the elevator in the basement corridor of the courthouse. He thought he had given the reporters all the color they wanted. His lawyer thought so too and went to alert the driver and attendant waiting in the private ambulance at the ramp entrance.

But one man hadn't dashed off to the phones with the rest. A feature writer, most likely, with no tight deadline to meet.

Palmer curled the corners of his mouth in a rueful grin that asked

what good was all the money in the world in exchange for a life in a wheelchair. The man failed to grin back. Steve looked hard at him, though grinning still.

A heavy dull hulk of a man, vaguely familiar, he stood staring down at Palmer. Then he broke his paralysis and clumsily handed Palmer a card.

It said the man was Francis X. Corkery of Peregrine Insurance, the company that would be shelling out. The man's name meant nothing to Steve Palmer but he tapped the card and nodded. Now he knew why the man seemed vaguely familiar.

Before going to trial, before even putting in the claim, Palmer had anticipated that the insurance company would be dogging him with hidden cameras, hoping to catch him off guard, hoping to film him rising from his wheelchair and walking about. And this Francis X. Corkery had been among those he had spotted as having more than casual interest in him as he wheeled about.

Palmer was on the point of asking Francis X. Corkery in a pleasant way what the hell he wanted when Francis X. Corkery burst out.

"You think you've really swung it, don't you, Palmer? No more nine-to-fiving. No more yessing a boss. No more counting your dimes. I've studied you. I know you. You love to go dancing. You love the night life. Wine, women and song. How long can you hold out?"



"Hold out?" Palmer made his eyes big. "Oh, I see. You think I'm faking."

"Damn right I do."

Steve Palmer shook his head sadly. This Francis X. Corkery wasn't going to get a rise out of him.

"You were born suspicious."

"That's right. With my first breath I asked to see my parents' marriage license."

You're still a bastard, Palmer thought. "Look, I'm beat with the strain of the trial, to say nothing of my injuries. Tell me in a few small words what you're getting at."

Corkery looked around before leaning his ungainly figure forward.

"I just want to let you know I'm going to see you don't enjoy spending a buck. You're a young man, under thirty, and you're going to have to sit out the best years of your life. Because I'll be watching like a hawk to see you take one step out of that wheelchair. You take that one step and we'll get you for faking your injury."

Palmer's eyes grew big with no effort on his part, then narrowed. Was this all building up to a bite? Was Corkery looking for Steve Palmer to buy him off?

No. Corkery's eyes were the eyes of a zealot.

Palmer smiled coolly, sympathetically.

"I think you're the one who's really sick. You know the names of some good doctors, the ones who testified for me. Better go see one of them. Now if you don't mind — or if you do — I see the ambulance men coming to get me out of here."

"Okay, Palmer. But remember this. There's nowhere in the world you can run to and shake me. Nowhere."

An almost religious fervor burned in his eyes and smoked in his voice. He whirled ponderously and jabbed a finger at the elevator button.

That "Nowhere" echoed in Palmer's mind like a raven's croak, echoed through the months of beat-

ing off the insurance company's appeal to a higher court. And reinforcing that echo wherever he turned when he ventured out was the hovering presence of Corkery or someone he suspected of being one of Corkery's eyes.

Palmer sat thinking about it on the day the millions were safely on deposit in his name. There was nowhere Steve could spend them in the way he'd been dreaming of all this chairbound while. Nowhere.

Nowhere? Steve Palmer slapped an arm of his wheelchair and grinned. The first thing was to find out where to look up yacht brokers.

She was a beauty. Her name too helped decide him — *Pilgrim* was another form of Peregrine, and Peregrine Insurance was footing the bill.

He sat in his wheelchair in his stateroom as *Pilgrim* got under way, Miami bound. He looked at the mahogany wainscoting, at the electric logs of the fireplace, at the original Dali painting of a man who didn't seem overly surprised to find his cane budding roses, at the chandelier dripping crystal drops. He felt the velvet of the drapes with his eyes. He surveyed the divan big as a playing field. The perfect setting, the perfect setup.

Miami would be only the first of a host of ports of call. He'd throw parties out of sight and sound of shore. Girls from night clubs would jump at the chance to visit aboard

a yacht. He'd invite the loveliest of the lot to see his stateroom.

He looked around the stateroom again, visualizing how it would be. The stereo throbbing soulfully, the split of Asti Spumante waiting in the silver bucket for the two glasses to chill, the fireplace glowing at the temperature of love, and the girl, willowy and willing, seeing him toss aside his yachting cap and rise. Making the scene in his mind, he rang for the steward. He'd drink to that now.

The carpeting hushed footsteps. He almost leaped out of the chair at a cough behind him.

"Sorry to startle you, sir."

Slowly he wheeled around and stared at Corkery. Francis X. Corkery, ungainly as before in a poorly fitting uniform.

"How the hell —"

"Insurance investigators make all kinds of contacts, sir. The steward got a wire his wife was sick and I signed on at the last minute in his place."

Palmer's impulse was to order the yacht back to Newport and dump Corkery. But the man signing on in Corkery's place could just as easily be a Corkery spy. Better the devil he knew. The devil he knew stood waiting with heavy patience.

"Get me a blanket for my legs. I'll be going out on deck."

"Yes, sir."

Francis X. was the cross he had to bear. Till he could figure a way out. Meanwhile, he had to get him-

self away from temptation and give himself time to think. He gave a sigh and got on the blower. He told the captain to forget Miami and shape a course to the Azores.

A play of light on the carpeting made him glance up at the gold leaf pattern of many stylized fish on the ceiling. If he couldn't fall asleep he could always count the damn things.

It was a dark night but the sea glowed. They appeared to be alone on the afterdeck. Corkery, leaning over the rail, seemed unaware Steve Palmer sat in the shadows behind him. The soft hissing of the ship through the waves would cover the thrusting away of the blanket, the rising up out of the chair.

Corkery was leaning well over the rail to stare down at the phosphorescence. Two quick steps and one hard shove and it would be over.

Steve Palmer smiled ironically to himself. Sure, but suppose his feet failed him? He hadn't been able to give them any exercise to speak of. Even if they didn't fail him, suppose it was a trap. Maybe Corkery was waiting for Palmer to make that move, had someone hiding nearby watching to give warning and bear witness:

Palmer cleared his throat.

"Corkery."

Corkery turned in heavy surprise.
"Is that you there, sir?"

Palmer smiled wryly in the dark.
"Would you mind wheeling me back to my stateroom?"

While awaiting inspiration, he took another tack, that of trying to make Corkery throw up the job. He kept Corkery on the hop fetching and carrying so that it seemed his finger or the button or Corkery was going to wear out. He daydreamed of the good old days on the high seas. Mutineer Corkery hanging from the yardarm.

He'd splice the main brace to that. He rang for Corkery to mix a Bloody Mary and complained about the drink's proportions and temperature.

"Sorry to be so fussy, Corkery. But we invalids can't help making nuisances of ourselves."

"I understand, sir."

And Corkery's heavy face showed that he did understand and that it wouldn't work. It would take a miracle to get this albatross off Steve Palmer's neck.

Palmer let up. Not so much for Corkery's sake as for his own. He realized he was becoming truly querulous, like a real invalid. And why make it easy for Corkery to spy on him by having the man in constant attendance? As it was, he barely dared more than flex his feet under the covers by way of exercising his legs. Having to be furtive on his own yacht really topped everything.

The *Pilgrim* had refueled and re-provisioned at the Azores and was standing off Santa Maria. What now? He let his map of the world fall to his lap.

He leaned back staring up at the fish pattern in gold leaf on the ceiling. He sat up. He studied the map. He got on the blower.

"Captain, I'd like you to chart a course."

"Very well, sir. Where to?"

"Biarritz."

"Very good, sir."

Corkery knocked and came in with a tray. Corkery lifted an eyebrow.

"Biarritz?"

Steve Palmer nodded, with a saintly smile, not taking Corkery up on the blatant admission he'd been eavesdropping.

Corkery showed a gleam of satisfaction.

"I didn't think you'd hold out this long, sir. Going to have one big blast before we extradite you?"

Palmer smiled serenely and took a glass of hot milk from the tray.

Biarritz. The Bay of Biscay, the foaming breakers, the great sweep of beach, the sultry weather, the girls in bikinis.

Palmer had radiophoned ahead, so he got quick clearance. He had also smoothed the way so that, once ashore, he sped in a waiting limousine to the railway station, where Corkery and a porter carried him aboard a train and folded the wheelchair. He sat looking out the win-

dow with a beatific smile and cheerfully pointed out to Corkery such marvels as the cattle in the pastures.

He had kept Corkery in the dark. Corkery sat beside him, not to say beside himself with curiosity, in the compartment they shared with a pair of nuns and a mother and her sickly child.

Corkery wore a frown that wanted to deepen, but a frown that he wiped off when the sunnier nun across from them nodded reassuringly. In the fuss of arriving, of getting Steve onto the platform and into his wheelchair, Corkery missed the name of the stop.

But he knew where they were when they reached the grotto and he saw on the spur of rock above it a statue of the Virgin Mary. The same nun caught his eye and nodded.

"There is the very spot where St. Bernadette saw the Blessed Virgin." She spoke English with great correctness. "Your friend — relative? — will walk again, if only he has faith."

She gestured at the crutches, and other paraphernalia of the miraculously cured, hanging from the walls.

Corkery watched Steve Palmer, face aglow, give the wheelchair a last, almost affectionate, pat.

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POOL PARTY

by ANDREW BENEDICT



GEORGE RAYMOND worked steadily at the bolts that held the chrome steel ladder to the tiling at the diving board end of the pool. It was a short ladder, going under water only a couple of feet. Already the pool, which was nine feet deep from end to end, was down almost two feet, so that the bottom of the ladder was nearly exposed.

The other ladder, at the far end, he had already removed and stored in the garage.

"Kid vandals," he remarked to Beth as he worked. "Get in and take anything they can just for the hell of it. I'll remove as much temptation as I can."

"Mightn't they break into the house, though?" Beth asked. "Those big windows—"

"Chance we have to take. There. I can lift the ladder out now."

"Wait, darling. One more dive? Just to say good-by to my beautiful pool?"

"Not now. When we finish packing, maybe. I'll leave the ladder here until then, so if there's time you can have a last couple of dives."

"I'll never have another pool like this." She tried to smile. "Will we be gone long?"

"Probably. In any case we won't be coming back here. You know that."

"I know."

He stood up, linked her arm through his, and led her toward the low, sprawling house that nestled up against the dead end of one of the canyons that dot the hills around Los Angeles.

"Let's finish the packing now," he said. "We have to be at International Airport by five at the latest. Remember, only the two

© 1969, by Robert Arthur

"You stay here with us," the big man said. "We got to bide. You'll keep us from the gas chamber." He grinned evilly. "The broad, she stays. If she's good to us, maybe she'll stay alive awhile."



bags. Just what you need. No souvenirs, no mementos. I'm not even taking my typewriter. We're traveling light."

"And fast," she said. "Won't you tell me what it's all about, darling? I know we're running from something. That letter from your agent this morning—Can't you tell me?"

"When we're in Spain, Beth," he said patiently. "It would—take too long now. Right now we're birds of passage, and we're migrating."

He led her into the house. She was puzzled, and a little frightened, but she did not ask any more questions.

An hour later an old convertible with the top down swung around a curve in the canyon road and stopped where the road ended at the foot of a driveway. On either side of the driveway were stone pillars.

One of them bore a small sign: *Raymond—Private*. A heavy chain, secured by a large padlock, swung between the pillars.

The man at the wheel, short, fat, middle-aged, was hatless, his face burned red. He lifted his sun glasses to inspect the sign. Then he turned to his companion, who was younger, light-haired and muscular.

"This is it, Joe. We've found the Professor."

The younger man exhaled cigarette smoke. "Private road. Iron

chain. Bushes, trees, all up the dead end of a canyon. He picked himself a nice place where nobody would see much of him."

"That figures." The fat man opened the car door and got out. "He's doing all right these days. Two best sellers, last three years. And married to a good-looking wife, just a couple of years ago. Former member of the women's Olympic diving team."

He walked up to the iron chain and inspected the padlock. Then from his pocket he took an instrument with a number of narrow blades. With this he worked briefly at the lock. It snapped open and he unhooked it, dropped the chain.

"The bigger they are, the easier they open," he said.

Joe slid over behind the wheel and drove the car across the chain and into the driveway. The fat man replaced the chain and relocked the padlock, then got back into the car.

"Now let's drive up and say hello."

The convertible moved up the blacktop drive, past screening bushes, and came out in a gravelled area by the pool, in front of the open garage. The two men got out.

"A pool yet," the older man said. "A big one. For the wife, I'd say. Joe, we've got it made. Everybody says California is the only place to live."

Joe gave the premises a swift scrutiny.

"Look," he said. He pointed to George Raymond's car, just outside the garage, the lid of the trunk up. "Two suitcases in the car. They're packing for a little trip. We got here just in time."

"But we got here." The fat man led the way toward the house. "Say, that pool looks good. Suppose the Professor has some trunks he can lend us? After he's welcomed us, that is."

They strode across the tiled patio and into the house without bothering to ring.

Beth Raymond closed the second bag and locked it. Then she called into the next room.

"I'm finished, George."

He came to the door, looking at his watch.

"Good," he said. "We'll have an hour to spare. You can have a quick swim, and we'll still have time to stop at the bank. How about a drink?"

"I'll fix it," she told him, and started for the living room. She was halfway into the room before she saw the fat, red-faced man lounging in a chair, a brandy glass in his hand.

"Hello, Mrs. Raymond," the fat man said. "Join me in a drink?"

"Who are you?" Her voice was taut. "What are you doing in here? I didn't hear any ring."

"I didn't ring. Call me Max.

You keep a real nice bar, Mrs. Raymond."

"Get out of here!" she exclaimed. "At once, or I'll call the police."

"Will you?" he chuckled. "You know, I don't think you will."

"Then I'll show you." The telephone was beside her.

She took one step and started to dial. Someone stepped up behind her, put a muscular arm around her and pulled her tightly back against a body that smelled of sweat. She realized instantly she was no match for the man's strength, and forced herself not to struggle.

The man who held her was young, blond, with closely-cropped hair; not tall, but with the body of an athlete. He had been studying her pictures over the fireplace, from the '60 Olympics, and she had not seen him until he seized her.

"You know something, doll?" he said into her ear. "You feel good. The Professor has taste."

"Let her go, Joe," Max said. "We don't want to get off on the wrong foot with our hostess. No use rushing things."

"That's right, Max," the younger man agreed. "Plenty of time to get acquainted later."

He released Beth. Controlling an impulse to shake, she took a step away and turned. The young man looked her up and down in insolent admiration. His features

were those of a handsome, slightly sulky child.

"I don't know what this means—" she kept her voice steady with an effort—"but the police out here are very unpleasant toward intruders."

"Now you know something?" Max smiled at her over his glass. "I don't think your husband would want you calling the police, even if we let you. Would you, Professor?"

Beth turned. George had come up behind her. He stopped, and took her cold hand in his.

"No, Beth. I think—no police."

"You—you know these men?"

"I know Max. We—roomed together, once."

Max chuckled. "That's one way of putting it. You see, Mrs. Raymond—"

"I'll tell her, Max!"

The fat man shrugged. "Just so she knows. Women get impulsive. But Mrs. Raymond looks like a very sensible type. Once she knows."

"George, what is he talking about?"

"Beth, it's what I was going to tell you when we got to Spain. It's the reason why I've always been evasive when you tried to get me to talk about myself. Max and I were cellmates in the penitentiary, back in New York. I escaped eight years ago."

"Now don't take it too hard, Mrs. Raymond," Max said, watching her face. "It was just one of

those things. The Professor—your husband, that is—was just out in a car with a couple of young hoods who decided to stick up a gas station. The attendant got killed. Your husband had no part of it, but he had a record, so they sent him up for twenty years."

"I'm sorry, Beth," George said, holding her hand tightly. "Sorry you had to learn like this."

After a moment, she returned the pressure of his fingers.

"It's all right," she said. "I know the kind of man you really are. I know you couldn't hurt anyone."

"Thank you, Beth." He turned to the fat man. "Max, how did you get here?"

Max rose and ambled over to the cellarette. He refilled his glass.

"A drink, Professor, to old times? You, Mrs. Raymond? Well, don't say I didn't ask you."

He returned to his chair and stretched out indolently.

"How did we get here? Well, you see, Georgie, I happened to read your last book. Best-seller, and all. I recognized a couple of little things in it that I told you about when we were sharing cell four-thirteen. That got me curious.

"When they paroled me, I hooked up with Joe, here. We found out nobody knew much about that popular author, George Raymond. No pictures, no address. Man of mystery. Most

people thought it was a publicity gag, but I knew better. I knew George Raymond had to be George Rice, otherwise the Professor, my old cellmate."

He sipped, and smacked his lips.

"I sent Joe in to talk to your literary agent's secretary. Joe has a way with women. Joe got your address from her. We bought an old car and headed west. I certainly am happy to see how well you've done for yourself, Professor."

"My agent wrote me," George said drily. "His secretary finally told him. Now that you've found me, what do you want? Money?"

"Money?" Max chuckled again. Joe, seated at the piano, ran his fingers over the keys in a mocking chord. "We can make money. But Joe is a little bit hot and I'm violating parole. We expect to make new connections out here. Until we do, we need a nice quiet place to stay. We're moving in with you."

"No!" Beth cried involuntarily. "We're going abroad!"

"*We're* going abroad," Max corrected. "You were hoping to be long gone when we got here, weren't you, Georgie?"

Unwillingly, George nodded. To Beth he said, "When I got Peter's letter this morning I knew someone must have come across my trail. That was the reason I suddenly decided we'd go to Spain."



"We'll have some great times," Max chuckled. "Why, while you and me are hashing over old times, Joe and your wife can be having a ball. She can teach him longhair music and he can teach her boogie-woogie. Joe, show the folks."

"A pleasure." Joe turned to the keyboard. "Piano Roll Blues?"

He launched into the tune with verve. When he had finished he rose, and made a little bow. "Thank you for your kind attention, folks."

"Joe could make a living playing in nightclubs," Max said. "That's how he started. Until he learned that killing people pays better money."

Unwillingly, Beth looked at

the smiling, small-boy face, almost cherubic except for the eyes. And the mouth.

"That's right," Joe said. "I rub people out." He pointed a finger at her like a pistol and made a series of popping sounds with his lips.

Involuntarily Beth flinched. George's arm tightened around her.

"Like that," Joe said. "Through the heart, the eye, the skull—whatever I aim at. I've never been caught."

"But last time was a pretty close call," Max said, "so, like I say, Joe is a little bit hot."

He stood up and drained his glass.

"We've driven a long way, and we're hot and sticky. Joe, what do you say we get cleaned up and let our good friends here give us a little lunch?"

"I want to try a swim in that pool before lunch." Joe grinned. "I never swam in a private pool before."

"Okay. Professor, you got some spare trunks?"

"In the guest room. That door there. Top drawer."

"We'll go and change. Come on, Joe, we'll let the Professor and his lady talk things over."

They strolled into the guest room and closed the door.

"George—" Beth began:

"Let's go outside." He led her out into the patio by the big pool.

It was almost a third empty by now.

"Beth," he said, his face tight, "I honestly thought I was safe, or I'd never have married you. Now there's only one thing to do. I have to stay here. You get in the car and go. Any place. Divorce me. Forget me."

"Before you decide my future for me—" her tone was icy—"you might tell me a little more about your real past."

"It's not a pretty story. I was a gutter kid. I became a sneak thief. I was in the penitentiary before I was twenty. In prison I got interested in reading and began to educate myself. But as soon as I was out I immediately drifted back into crime.

"Then came that killing Max told you about. He's right. I was just riding with a couple of guys I didn't like very well, and I was sent up because of my record.

"I was twenty-four. I haunted the library and in time I became the assistant librarian. That's when I was nicknamed the Professor. I started writing stories about the men I knew. Then one day I escaped, just walked out with a delegation of visiting doctors." George hesitated a moment, looking at his wife he went on:

"I came to California, holed up in a shack, began writing. When I clicked, I kept my picture out of print, avoided publicity, mingled with just a few selected people. When I met you, I'd aged enough

so I figured no one would recognize me."

"And now?" she asked.

"Now I'm at Max's mercy. One word to the police and I'll be back in jail. But you're not tied down. Beth, you have to go. Leave me."

"Leave you now? What kind of woman do you think I am? Of course I don't intend to leave you."

He was silent a moment. Then: "Thank you, Beth," he said. "Thank you very much."

"But what are we going to do?" she asked. "Something terrible will happen if they stay. I know it will. That Joe frightens me. He—"

"Beth! Go get the police. I have money now, I can hire lawyers, get a new trial. In the end, I think I can prove I'm rehabilitated."

"No!" She gripped his hand. "Suppose you don't win? You think I'll risk having them take you away from me for ever? No, George! I won't take that chance. I can't!"

Her gaze went past him. Max and Joe were coming out of the house. Max wore red swimming trunks and Joe a pair of gaudy Hawaiian print.

"Hey!" Joe said as they came up. "The pool. The water's way down. What's wrong?"

"We were draining it," George said. His lips twisted. "We were going away."

"Well, stop draining it. Turn

the water back on. You've got company now and you're not going anyplace."

"All right." George walked over to the valves, closed the drain valve, and turned on the inlet valve. Joe grinned at Beth.

"I showed you how I play the piano," he said. "Suppose you show me how to dive, now. Seems you're quite a diver, doll. As soon as there is enough water."

"There is enough water now," Beth said. "Let me get my suit on."

She ran into the house. Joe's gaze followed her. Max chuckled.

"What do you really want, Max?" George demanded. "If all you want is a hideout—how long?"

"We'll see, we'll see. Long enough to make some good connections. After that, George, you and your little lady will be free as birds. Of course, now that you're in clover, I know you'll want to share with an old pal."

"Blackmail?" George Raymond asked. "For the rest of my life?"

"You'll get used to it. I won't bear down too hard. Say, here comes your little lady back. You know, I think she's going to take a liking to Joe. The women all do. Just a word of advice, Georgie. Don't get jealous."

"No, Max," George said violently as Beth, in a dry swim suit and wearing wooden clogs, came running out. "I won't buy it. I'm going to the police."

Without seeming to move, Max seized his wrist and twisted it up behind his back.

"Joe," he said.

Smiling lazily, Joe stepped up and gave George two vicious slaps.

Then he drove a short punch to George's jaw. George sagged in Max's arms. The fat man lowered him to the tiles and let him sprawl.

"George!" Beth ran up to them and knelt beside her husband. "You've hurt him!"

"Just a little lesson, doll," Joe said. "A nice clean knockout. He'll come around as good as ever."

"He was talking about the cops," Max said. "You'd better speak to him when he wakes up. Somebody might get hurt if he doesn't change his mind. Him—or maybe even you."

"And we'd hate to hurt anybody as pretty as you," Joe said. "Let the Professor sleep it off. Now how about that diving lesson you promised me? Later I'll teach you something." He paused, and grinned. "Maybe how to play boogie-woogie."

Beth took a deep breath and slowly stood up. George was breathing evenly, though deeply unconscious.

"All right," she said. "It doesn't seem as if I have any choice."

She walked to the diving platform, kicking off her clogs as she

went. Climbing to the board, she poised there, gathered herself, and dove. She clove the water neatly and made a long glide to the surface.

"See?" she said. "There's plenty of water. Six feet of it still. This is a nine foot pool. Just don't dive too deep."

"Anything you can do, I can do." Joe dove from the edge of the pool and came up beside her. "We're going to have to do this lots, doll." He turned and waved to Max. "Come on in, Max. It's really great. Dunk the carcass."

"All right," Max chuckled. "Just until the Professor wakes up. A quick one now. Plenty of time later."

He sat on the edge of the pool and went into the water feet first. He came up blowing and sputtering.

"This is it, Joe boy. This is the life."

"The life for us, eh Max?"

"Now I'll show you something else," Beth said. She swam to the pool ladder and lifted herself out.

"We're watching, doll," Joe said. "What are you going to show us?"

"This." Beth bent and pulled out the bolts that George had previously loosened, the bolts that anchored the pool ladder to the tiling. Then she lifted the whole ladder out of the water and put it down several feet away.

"Now," she said, her voice

tight, "teach me something. Teach me how to get out of a diving pool with no shallow area, when there's no ladder and the water is too low to pull yourself out."

"Hey!" Max said in sudden alarm. "She took out the ladder. Joe, how are we going to get out of this pool? The sides are too high to reach the top."

"I'll show you." Joe's tone was coldly savage. "The doll wants to play games, I'll show her games."

He swam strongly to the side of the pool, let himself go low in the water, then propelled himself upwards as high as he could reach. The rounded rim of the pool was now three feet above the water level, but he caught it with his finger tips and clung there. Then he pulled himself up inch by inch, until his head was level with the rim of the pool.

Beth watched as he strained upwards. Then she reached for one of the wooden clogs she had discarded. Holding it like a hammer, she brought it down on his fingers.

As if squashing a fly, she smashed first his right hand, then his left. Joe screamed and fell back into the pool. He came up gasping and choking, and trod water below her.

"All right!" he said hoarsely. "You're going to be one sorry doll when I get through with you."

"Am I, Joe?" She knelt and looked directly down into his face.

"Then come on. Show me how you're going to get out of this pool, with the water so low and the steps gone and nothing to hold on to."

She leaned closer.

"I'll tell you something. It happened to me once years ago. I swam for three hours before someone came to help me out. But I'm



a good swimmer. Can you swim three hours, Joe? Or three days, maybe? With me here to smash your fingers every time you try to climb out?"

"Joe!" Max's eyes were bulging with panic. He was threshing and floundering, trying to keep his head high out of the water. "I got to get out. I'm getting out of breath. I'm all out of shape from being in stir."

"Lie back, you clown! Float. Be calm! You can float a long time. I'll figure this."

Joe raced for the opposite side of the pool while Max shouted after him. He made it to the pool wall, flung himself up, and once more managed to catch the rim

with his fingers. Grimacing with pain, he struggled to pull himself the rest of the way.

Without hurrying, Beth walked around the pool and stood over him.

"Another lesson, Joe?" Stooping, she smashed his hands again with the wooden clog.

Joe fell back into the water, yelling obscenely. Then he stopped, to save his breath, and swam back to the other side again. But she was waiting for him when he got there.

He did not try to climb out. Instead he floated, looking up at her.

She bent over, her face mirroring cold loathing. "You hurt my husband," she said. "You've hurt lots of people. Killed some of them. But nobody's ever hurt you before, have they?"

"You can't get away with this, doll," Joe gasped. "Any minute somebody will come."

"No one comes here unless they're invited. And no one can hear you yell—we're too isolated. You came here to destroy my husband and our happiness. Now you're trapped. Don't you understand yet?"

"Joe," Max said. "She means it. Look, Mrs. Raymond, listen, it was all a gag, see? I mean, just a joke. We weren't going to stay. Just put down that ladder and we'll go quiet. We won't bother the Professor ever again."

"No, Max," Beth said, her voice flat. "You came here to stay and you're going to stay. Where you are. In the pool."

"Max," Joe said sharply. "You swim to one end and I'll swim to the other. She can't stop both of us."

Lying on his back now, floating, Max looked at the three foot expanse of wall above the water level doubtfully.

"It's no good, Joe," he said finally. "My arms ain't long enough. I couldn't get up high enough to get a grip. You're tall, but I'm a shorty."

"You're not giving up, Max?" Beth's voice was taunting. "Giving up so soon? Oh, you're two big brave murderers, aren't you? The kind of men who think all women are soft and frightened. Well, we aren't. Not when we're fighting for something. And I'm fighting for my husband and my happiness."

She paused, to catch her breath, and the two men floating in the water stared up at her.

"You haven't thought this through, doll," Joe said. "There will still be police. They'll catch up with the Professor."

"I don't think so. When you get tired swimming, we'll drive your car thirty or forty miles up into the mountains, after it's good and dark. You'll be in it, of course. There are lots of deep ravines for it to go into. If you are ever found and identified, there won't

be anything to connect you with my husband. Nothing."

"Joe," Max wheezed, "I got my breath back a little, but I can't swim much longer, not even float. I mean I'm too soft from all that time in stir. You gotta think of something, Joe."

"I have thought of something." Joe's voice was harsh. "I'm six foot, see? Standing on my shoulders, you can scramble out of the pool easy."

"Yeah." A cold light of calculation came into the older man's eyes. "You go under by the wall, I get on your shoulders and climb out. Then we got her."

Beth lifted the wooden clog warningly.

"You know what will happen to you, Max."

"Ha!" Max snorted. He was already swimming to the pool wall, with Joe beside him. "Just let me get my hands on you, doll, and you've got a broken leg or wrist. If necessary, I'll pull you in with us, then we'll see. A couple of whacks won't kill me."

Joe was preparing to submerge himself, while Max got behind him, awkwardly trying to get his knees on Joe's shoulders. The first attempt failed, but they started over again.

Beth, after watching for a moment, fled to the garage. Swiftly she snatched from where they had stored it a coiled hose, used for washing off the tiled area

around the pool, and ran back with it.

Joe was heaving now and Max's head had emerged above the rim of the pool. Max fell forward with his chest on the tiles, and gasping, scrambling, while below him Joe pushed, he pulled himself inch by inch forward.

Hurrying, but trying not to hurry too fast, Beth threaded the end of the hose to the pipe connection. She got it tight and spun the faucet handle wide open in a final motion.

Then she ran back to stand three feet in front of Max, trailing the hose behind her.

"Try this, Max!" she cried, and gave the nozzle a turn.

A heavy stream of water, at high pressure, shot out. Max, gaping at her, his mouth open, caught the stream first between his eyes, then in his open mouth.

He slid back, choking, gasping, as he tried to get air into his lungs and drew in the water which had been driven down his throat.

"Max!" Joe shouted below, unable to see what was happening. "Get her!"

But Max, helpless in his agony for air, fell back on top of Joe. He grasped the younger man around the neck in a desperate attempt to stay above water, and they both went under, threshing and churning the pool in frantic waves.

"Max, let go! You'll drown us both!" Joe half shouted, half

sobbed, as he managed to get his head above water again.

But Max, still choking uncontrollably, was beyond reason. They went under once more, in a wild tangle of arms and legs. Seconds later they surfaced again, but only for an instant, just long enough for Joe to let out a blubbering scream. This time, when they went under, they did not come up again.

George moaned. Beth ran to his side, knelt.

"George," she whispered. "George, dear."

He took a deep breath. His eyes opened, shut again, then opened once more. He looked up and managed a smile.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"I'm fine. How do you feel?"

"Shaky. Help me up."

She helped him stand, and after a wobbly moment he was able to stand by himself. He looked around and blinked. The big pool was empty. The agitated surface of a few moments before was

smoothing out except for a few last air bubbles that came up and burst.

"Why, where are they?" George asked. "Inside the house?"

"No." She held his hand tightly. "No, George."

"Then where?" He stared at her, puzzled.

"We took care of them. Me and my pool. I knew I could do it as soon as they said they wanted a swim. You'd have stopped me. But I knew it had to be done. They were evil. They'd have done terrible things to us."

"And I wouldn't allow that: I'm a woman, George, and a woman will do anything she has to to protect her happiness. No one is going to take you away from me. Ever!"

Then Beth put her face again his shoulder and began to weep. But when the period of reaction was over, and she told him what they had to do next, she felt nothing but savage satisfaction.

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MURDER AT GAN-EL



Two sets of footprints led to what was left of little Dina. Only one came back. Who had killed the girl. And — why?

by

HAIM BEN-DOV

PLASTER CASTS and a piece of glass attracted my eyes as I stepped into the room. A murder in a small Israeli community the size of Gan-El always made good reading, especially for my weekly magazine, *The Flash*.



Inspector Nissim waved me to a chair and followed my glance to the floor.

"Four?" I said, raising by eyebrows, as I sat down. "Didn't you mention five, Inspector?"

"This one is a double."

He lifted one of the casts and laid it on the desk for me to look at. "First impression, wider and bigger shoes or smaller boots. Inside, going the opposite way, the second print impression, these are not work shoes." He looked me over briefly and added, "I know who killed her. I think I can prove it soon."

"If that's the case, Inspector, why call the two boys down? Why not just arrest the guilty one?"

He forced a smile. "I'll know which one only after I've had a chat with them," he said. "Actually, it's quite simple."

He was about to explain, but the knock on the door stopped him. "Come in, Sergeant," he said.

The door opened and I recognized Sergeant Golan, and behind him Elie and Mike as they entered. Elie Klein, his red hair falling loosely on his forehead, was wet with perspiration. Mike Rabinoff, his dark brown hair neatly combed, was very pale.

"That'll be all, Sergeant, thank you."

The moment the door closed behind Sergeant Golan, Inspector Nissim asked the boys to be seated. I watched them closely. Both seemed ill at ease, ignoring each

other's eyes, as well as the inspector's desk and certainly didn't notice my existence at all.

Without a moments delay, after finally catching the eyes of both boys, Inspector Nissim began. "Now, the casts you see are prints taken from the scene of the murder. The broken pieces of glass, Eli, confirm to a prescription you have had made for bi-focals. They were found at the scene, next to the dead girl."

The inspector paused to examine the piece of glass and added, "It belongs to you all right, Elie. I checked with the optometrist."

Elie Klein avoided his eyes and busied himself with his fingernails.

Inspector Nissim continued, "Now, since we have established your presence there, Elie, suppose you tell me in your own words what you were doing there."

Elie Klein said meekly, "Sir, no matter what you are thinking, I didn't kill her. I didn't —"

Inspector Nissim smiled. "Since you were there, Elie, you should know who stabbed her. Right?"

Mike Rabinoff moved in his seat and looked away. Elie Klein said almost in a whisper, "He did."

"By he, I assume you mean Michael Rabinoff here."

Mike jumped to his feet, turned toward Elie and screamed, "You liar, I didn't kill her! You know damn well I didn't! You did it yourself!"

During the several seconds of

complete silence that followed Rabinoff's sudden outburst, the inspector looked the boys over thoughtfully. Finally, Nissim shrugged and said in an annoyed voice, "Both of you were present. I'd like to know why."

They started talking at the same time, trying to outshout each other. When the excited voices mingled, so that what was said was unclear, Nissim waved them both to silence.

"Elie," he said, "you talk first."

Elie Klein wet his lips and examined his fingernails. "Dina came to me and asked for help—" He looked briefly at the floor, as though making a desperate effort to remember. "It was about ten-thirty when she came. When she left, I followed her."

"Did she say why she needed your help?"

"She said someone was following her. She was scared."

"That's all she said?"

"While she talked to me, she must have seen the one she feared. Anyway she took off fast in the direction of the trees."

"And you followed her right away?" Nissim asked.

"Yes, almost the same instant."

"Did you get to see who scared her off?"

"Not at first" Elie cast a glance at Rabinoff. "But when I got there, I saw Mike coming towards her."

"Did you see anyone else?"

"Only Mike and Dina, sir." Again he gave Mike Rabinoff a

sharp look. "I went up to him and told him he won't get away with it. I told him I'll stop him."

The inspector glanced at Mike Rabinoff and back to Elie Klein. "And what did he say to that?"

"He threatened to teach me a lesson and pulled out a knife."

Mike made several attempts to protest but inspector Nissim instructed him to await his turn.

"So you fought?" the inspector pressed Elie.

"Yes, we fought and he almost stabbed me. I managed to grab the knife after he scratched me on the back of the neck. That's when Dina came in between us, begging us to stop. Elie hesitated. Inspector Nissim motioned him to go on. "We struggled. She was suddenly in the middle of it all and got stabbed. When she fell to the ground gasping, I panicked and ran off."

"Did Mike stay?"

"No. He ran away at the same time. I'm not sure where."

Inspector Nissim turned to Mike Rabinoff. "How about you, why did you follow her?"

Mike excitedly poured out his story. He came up with an identical account of Dina asking him for help. He followed the girl to see who threatened her, only to discover that Elie Klein was the one she was afraid of.

"You saw no one else around?"

"No, sir, I didn't—"

"What did you do after she fell?"

"I was afraid. She was stabbed with my knife—"

Inspector Nissim looked over the boys thoughtfully. "So, both of you believed he had caused her death?"

They nodded.

"The fact is," Inspector Nissim said, "you helped the killer. The first knife wound inflicted wasn't fatal. But when you ran off and left her there all alone, the killer came and finished the job."

Both young men were stunned into silence. The inspector went on: "Now, we shall see who returned to stab her the second time. Elie, will you come over here, please?"

Elie Klein approached the desk and looked at the cast the inspector placed on it. "Are those the shoes you wore that day to work, Elie?" And as Klein nodded, Nissim said, "Please take off your right shoe for a moment."

Elie Klein followed instructions and handed the shoe over to the inspector. Inspector Nissim inserted the shoe into the cast, noting that it moved around loosely.

"Please sit down, Elie," he said. "Now, Mike, let's have your right shoe."

Mike Rabinoff gave him the shoe and watched the cast with interest, a flicker of amusement in his eyes. The shoe fitted the cast, yet it moved around loosely, the same as Elie's.

"Hmmmm!" Inspector Nissim

turned the shoe and looked at the sole. "Just as I thought." He gave Mike a sharp look. "I'm afraid, Michael Rabinoff, you are under arrest for murder."

Mike Rabinoff reddened and kept staring at the cast with disbelief. "How can you tell, inspector?"

Inspector Nissim smiled. "Witnesses told me the only ones working at the harvest with dressy shoes on were you and Elie."

"This doesn't prove that I —"

The inspector went on calmly, "It does. Elie wore dressy shoes all right, but his print shows him going away from the body while yours goes away once and comes back again in the opposite direction. Besides, you have a hole in your right shoe sole. The cast shows it too. Elie's sole is almost new."

Turning to me, the inspector added, rather pleased with himself, "So you see, sometimes it doesn't pay to save on shoes. Had Mike fixed the sole earlier, I doubt whether I would have been able to trace him so fast."

Mike Rabinoff stared at the floor now, examining his shoes.

"Sorry," he said meekly. "It all started as an accident. When it happened, I was afraid she'd tell everybody that I was the first to pull the knife. I didn't know what to do, I didn't mean to, sir, I really didn't—"

"I know, I know," Inspector Nissim said. "Killers are always sorry after they are caught."

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